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### Meaning in Apocalypse

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Senior Honors Thesis

Alex Metz

## Meaning in Apocalypse

### **Preface Regarding Covid-19:**

What does the COVID-19 crisis have to do with writing about the apocalypse? One would hope, fairly little. However, there is an undeniable fear hovering over the question. It is a fear of the unknown; a fear that our way of life may change, irreversibly, into something unrecognizable. This is quintessentially the same fear we have about the apocalypse. It is the irreversibility and the scale of the change that cause these issues to hold such weight both philosophically and in the minds of everyday people. This paper originally intended to be about a counterfactual analysis of the apocalypse, but the scenarios I had envisioned were never meant to be real “endgame theories” or predictions about the future. Rather, the evocation of the apocalypse, and the analysis of its various manifestations in modern discourse were supposed to expose certain elements of modern society. The hope of this paper was that by drawing conclusions about ethics in the apocalypse, we might also draw similar conclusions about the moral imperatives in our everyday lives. However, the sudden onset of the COVID-19 crisis has forced me to reevaluate, both the purpose of, and conclusions that this paper draws. The metaphors have become literal. No longer is the question how the apocalypse affects our ethics; the question must now be: How will our ethics endure the apocalypse?

This is probably not an answerable question. It assumes too narrow an understanding of human ethics, and suggests a false dichotomy both between civility and barbarism, and between the human species on one hand, and some external, corrupting destroyer on the other. These divisions are obviously false for the simple reason that individuals come from a variety of

backgrounds, each with a different notion of “right” and “wrong,” and each with a different understanding of morality’s place in day to day life. That being said, there does seem to be some sense in which “the core” of humanity’s western democratic values now faces off against a kind of “mass survival instinct.” Throughout human history during times of crisis, people have been willing to sacrifice personal liberty, as well as their ideals regarding the treatment of others, in the name of safety. One clear example of this is the rise in xenophobia, and the rollbacks in personal privacy, that the United States saw after the 9/11 terror attacks. Another instance is the way in which the Jewish people were scapegoated in Europe during the economic depression that followed the first World War. At this very moment, we see echoes of this sentiment in the mislabeling of COVID-19 as the “Chinese Virus” or “Wuhan Virus.”

This, of course, raises the question of whether or not the current pandemic could be labeled as an apocalyptic event. Initially, this paper devoted relatively little attention to the problem of defining what actually constitutes an apocalypse. There were several reasons for this. For one, the imagery of apocalypse is so pervasive in our culture, from political advertisements to mass media. Visions of apocalypse, especially atomic apocalypse, repeat themselves again and again. In addition, as philosophy students are aware, it is difficult to find necessary and sufficient definitional conditions for anything, let alone an “event” that might take any number of forms including some which we cannot yet imagine. The other reason was that the precise definition of apocalypse seemed secondary to the question of what human beings ought to do if faced with such an event, whatever it may actually end up looking like.

But, seeing how we are all now in the midst of crisis that seems vaguely apocalyptic, the question of whether or not some threshold has been crossed, sending us into the end of days, demands more attention. How do we differentiate apocalypses from mere mass disasters? This is

not so easy. Take just one recent example of a disaster on a large scale: the tsunami that destroyed the Fukushima nuclear plant. In 2011, an earthquake off the coast of Japan caused a tsunami which knocked out power to the coastal plant causing three reactor meltdowns as well as several smaller breaches. This incident had widespread social, environmental, and political effects, and was the worst nuclear disaster since the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. However, to our ordinary understanding, this event is not truly apocalyptic.

On the other hand, a full-scale nuclear exchange, to take the most obvious example, probably would count as apocalyptic. This dichotomy leads us to imagine that the primary feature of the apocalypse is its scope. That is to say that for an event to be apocalyptic, it cannot affect only one nation or one area of the world, but that it must threaten the human species itself. The key word here is threaten as the very notion of “post-apocalyptic” suggest that an apocalypse does not preclude the possibility of some significant portion of the species surviving. We can therefore separate the idea of the apocalypse from the idea of human extinction, though the latter would certainly seem to imply the former.

In this way, we can say that the threat of apocalypse is not so much a threat to human existence as it is a threat to a certain conception of human life. The implicit claim here obviously being that our current mode of being, that is to say, western civilization, has some kind of normative weight. This is what brought me to be interested in this project in the first place. To try and find something out about the nature of what gives human society value by way of an examination of hypothetical societies that have somehow lost this fundamental element. I discuss this in more detail later in the paper.

The reason COVID-19 has been so disruptive to this paper, other than the obvious ways in which it has been disruptive to everyone, is because it allows us to preform a more

observational type of analysis of the important aspects of human civilization and what seems to threaten these things in the context of our current international crisis.

One thing, which had previously occurred to me, but that I had not thought pertinent to the discussion of meaning here was that like most ills of society, apocalypse and apocalypse like events affect more vulnerable populations disproportionately. As such, one somewhat unique aspect of COVID 19 is that it threatens to homogenize large populations along socioeconomic lines. A more general sense in which this same issue can be taken up is via the discussion of the long term impacts of climate change, and in particular sea level rise which threatens to decimate the world's coastal cities in much the same way that hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005.

I'll start by saying that though COVID-19 meets some plausible criteria for apocalypse, namely that it threatens human life on a large scale, it does not fulfill certain other requirements that I take to be essential. The largest of these is what I will call "irreversibility."

When we think about the apocalypse, we think of it as being an event that goes far beyond an ordinary disaster. Often substituted for the word are "Armageddon" or "the end of days." As such, we can understand the apocalypse as being a terminal event, an event which not only causes great destruction but serves as a barrier between one era and the next, or, perhaps more accurately, as a signpost of change marking the extinction of humans, or the destruction of human civilization. What is unique about this barrier is that it can only be crossed in one direction. Whereas we might think of some phenomena as reversible, the apocalypse is not. This helps to explain why, apart from the general fact that destruction and loss of life on a large scale are ills to be avoided, the apocalypse is bad. It threatens something humans collectively protect,

and is irreclaimable if lost. Part of the purpose of this paper is to try and articulate what that thing is exactly.

But, in regard to the current COVID-19 crisis, I will say it does not seem to meet this irreplaceability condition. This is not to say that this is not a time of great personal tragedy. The loss of life from this pandemic in the months and years to come will prove to be astonishing, even more so, perhaps, than we are aware of right now. These deaths will prove costly to our culture, not only because losing someone causes immeasurable pain to those left behind, but because of the contributions to science, literature, and the arts that some of these individuals would have made, and now never will. In some ways, of course, this loss is irreplaceable. However, it is the difference between the loss of something yet to come, and the erasure of what has already been.

Again, none of this is to say that we should somehow be thankful the COVID-19 crisis falls short of an apocalypse. The fact that I have really only distinguished it here by use of a subtle differentiation would suggest that people have every right to be afraid, angry, awash, and unable to accept their circumstances. Moreover, the handling of the crisis, both domestically and worldwide has been relatively abysmal. The fear that unsavory agents may attempt to use this as an opportunity to grab or solidify power, I think is legitimate and something that we as both a national and global populous need to be on guard against. But, if we can hang together now, I think it's likely our civilization will endure.

### **Introduction:**

There is a tension that arises from two hugely prevalent themes in modern thought. These are: meaning and the apocalypse. The search for meaning, in our individual lives and in life in general, has interested human beings for thousands of years. For almost as long, people have

been interested in the loss of meaning: their own destruction, the apocalypse. These are clearly two very separate areas of thought. For one's life to be meaningful, plausibly, is the highest good one can achieve. Similarly, to understand the "meaning of life" would be a philosophical achievement unparalleled in the history of the discipline.

However, even as we strive for these goals, we do so within a society and a civilization. One very broad definition of the apocalypse is as an event that destroys human civilization as we know it. If this is the case, then whatever meaning we achieve, and whatever conditions for meaningfulness we put forth, "the apocalypse," whatever that might turn out to be, has the power to make those conceptions of meaning moot. If we think that the possibility of the apocalypse is at all plausible, we must also understand that a radical reworking of meaning under those circumstances is required. Such a reworking, or at least the beginnings of one, is the project of this paper. Furthermore, it is my intent to show that the implications for meaning in the apocalypse might be far more wide reaching than it might at first seem.

At no other time has the human species had the ability to completely exterminate itself. The fear of this extermination can take many forms, the most common ichnographically obviously being the fear of nuclear destruction. However, this is not the only threat facing us; the byproducts of human progress have altered the climate in such a way as to place it on a precarious perch, and measures to address this issue seem to be far too little far too late. Likewise, the outbreak of COVID-19 illustrates starkly just how unprepared the United States, and the world more generally, is for deadly illness on a mass scale. Add to this the innumerable, unforeseeable, natural disasters, and the seemingly constant threat of war and economic collapse, and it is easy to see why the apocalypse has been such an omnipresent fascination.

What does this mean for our existence as human beings? One possibility, of course, is that it means nothing. Humans, in general, have always sought to destroy one another. And yet, some have always managed to survive and carry our civilization forward. In this way, the “threat” of an apocalypse or the question of what such an event means might seem to fall flat. And indeed, it may be the case that human civilization will endure for hundreds of generations to come. But, if we look at the rate of human expansion and technological development, and understand the fact that these things are not only not slowing down, but in fact accelerating, then we have to take the possibility of apocalypse, on some scale at least, very seriously.

This is perhaps not a controversial point. Everyone, upon hearing the word apocalypse, or apocalyptic, or Armageddon, etc., immediately conjures a vivid picture in their mind, perhaps of the monuments of civilization reduced to a desolate wasteland, or of atomic explosions, or of great natural disasters tearing the very Earth apart. But, there would seem to be a distinction between being familiar with the imagistic rhetoric of the apocalypse, perhaps even fearing the apocalypse, and actually coming to terms with what the causes and repercussions of such an event would actually be.

Of course, the images of apocalypse are one of its most fascinating aspects. For one thing, it is an epistemological conundrum as to how we as a society can have such a vivid, visceral, and imagistic understanding of an event which may not even happen. Take, for example, the infamous “Daisy Girl” advertisement from 1964. It depicts a small girl in a meadow, picking flowers, who is shortly incinerated by an atomic explosion. Though the ad aired only once, and was less than a minute long, the effect it had on the general public was so profound the advertisement is generally cited as a reason Lyndon Johnson eventually won the presidency over Barry Goldwater.

One could spend endless time tracing the lineage of these images. In the last century alone, cinema, and mainstream Hollywood in particular, has added a tremendously to our canonical understanding of the images of apocalypse. Films like *Dr. Strangelove*, *Planet of the Apes*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, and *The Terminator*, to name only a few, have given our culture a visual vocabulary to understand and express the threat of destruction that has fascinated/terrified human beings for so long.

Of course, the literary tradition of apocalypse extends as far back as history itself. Mary Shelly's *The Last Man*, as well as H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* both show visions of a desolate future in which none of the triumphs of civilization have endured. The Book of Revelations is also an important text as, even today, the motivation of much "apocalyptic rhetoric" is an effort to sway the culture back towards a conservative, biblical literalist understanding of not only what makes a life meaningful, but also of what makes a life legitimate.

Though these works and the images provide a wide variety of examples to draw from when we imagine an apocalypse, they do not necessarily bring us any closer to an exhaustive definition. In my view, there are several different ways we might approach defining the apocalypse, each of which stems from a different vein of human thought, and each of which is useful for when we eventually take up the question of what a meaningful apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic life might look like. We will discuss these in greater detail later, for now I want to delve deeper into why I think the formation of an apocalyptic ethics is a worthwhile pursuit.

When we consider the theories of meaning philosophers and others have come up with to try and define the conditions under which life seems worth living, they almost invariably rely on the agent's existence in a non-apocalyptic world. As we have seen, there are plausible reasons to worry that that state of existence may not always exist. The natural human response to this is to

try and figure out if the worry of apocalypse is strong enough to merit preparation. This, of course, leads to an inquest into what kinds of events seem “apocalyptic,” and what we might do about them.

The first thing that comes to mind is a totally catastrophic event. This is the type of event that, if it didn’t eliminate all life on Earth, would at least expunge all human life. The impact of a large asteroid for example, would extinguish life on Earth through sterilization. By the same token, if the sun were to explode, there would be little hope for life on Earth. A full-scale nuclear exchange, the kind the prognosticators of extinction have long feared, would seem to be in that same class of calamity. Although, I think it is important to note that this example has the distinction of being a) man made and b) preventable, so it may be worth discussing with other, less total examples of apocalypse. Short of that though, the idea that all human life will be extinguished in the near future seems remote.

These examples also turn out not to be very interesting for the same reason that Epicurus suggested we should not fear death. That is to say, if all life/human life on Earth is extinguished, there can really be no human ethics, morality, or conceptions of meaning. These events are to be avoided precisely because they preclude the possibility of anything coming after them.

This does not mean the question of apocalypse is moot. I think not. Instead, it is merely a matter of scale. Scale is important both to estimating the probability of an apocalypse, and to our understanding of its scope. It could be the case that what is unlikely to happen in twenty years is very likely to happen in one-hundred or five-hundred. This time frame is particularly illustrative of the disasters that may occur as a result of climate change. At a scale of 10,000 or 100,000 years remote possibilities become almost certain. For example, the Yellowstone “Super” volcano

is fairly unlikely to erupt in the next decade, but much more likely to erupt in the next 100,000 years.

Scale is also important as a factor of the event itself. Some might argue that some “small scale” apocalypses have already occurred. The holocaust, as well as other mass genocides, are good candidates for the types of events which seem apocalyptic in their means and ends, yet civilization seems to endure. Likewise, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the second world war epitomizes, on a much smaller scale, the fear that nuclear weapons still hold over the world. Categorizing these events as “small scale” apocalypses is not to try and lessen the trauma and importance that they carry, rather it is to say that these are among the most heartbreaking examples of extreme and widespread suffering the human species has ever had to endure, and yet, however we define the apocalypse, it must be something even more widespread and even more terrible. This, again, emphasizes the importance of thinking about the apocalypse. If we are anywhere near an event like this, we must proceed with extreme caution as it must, by its very definition, be a more destructive and more influential event than any other in human history. And, if this is the case, there certainly has not been enough scholarly attention given to how the core of our humanity might endure such an event.

What should we make of this tension between our current theories of meaning and the seeming inevitability of a large-scale destructive event? One important requirement for theories of meaning is that they be universal. Therefore, if any of our current theories of meaning are worth anything at all, there should be at least some small thing we are able to extract from them and apply to a post-apocalyptic world. Of course, the starting point for this paper was to suggest that our current theories of meaning would not apply if the circumstances under which they were formulated changed too drastically. I think this is true, but I also don't take that to be

incompatible with the idea that the basic direction of these ideas was more or less correct. That is to say that in constructing a theory of meaning for the apocalypse, one essential goal may be to preserve something from the core of what we now consider to be meaningful.

And, for that matter, why think that living in a post-apocalyptic world is a problem for meaning at all? It seems like it is not a problem for other branches of philosophy. Metaphysics, for example, seems to escape the apocalypse relatively unscathed. Likewise, it doesn't seem as if any core tenants of epistemology would be changed in a world where civilization as we know it was eliminated. Why should the philosophy of meaning be any different? Or, to put things another way, why think that the apocalypse would cause any disruption to our understanding of meaningfulness when other catastrophic events have seemingly not caused a comparable imbalance.

For one, I think that it is false to say that other historical events have not made large impacts on our understanding of what is good and what is that makes a life meaningful. I have already suggested that an understanding of the holocaust can help us to imagine what a "full scale" apocalypse might look like. Many survivors of, and people proximal to, the holocaust devoted the remainder of their lives to the remembrance and understanding of that event. At least to individuals involved then, the holocaust caused huge upheavals in people's understanding of what makes life meaningful. Perhaps the reason it might appear to an outsider that no major changes in our understanding of meaning occurred between the late 1930s and the end of World War II is because those individuals were not personally affected. The nature of the apocalypse seems to suggest that no one will experience it as an outsider, and that we must therefore adjust our theories of meaning to accommodate the possibility of a post-apocalyptic world.

Theories of meaning, whether they be objective or subjective, tend to make certain assumptions about the world. Objectivism (the idea that one's life having meaning is at least not wholly a function one's self-satisfaction) in particular demands one puts one life to some "use." These uses often include the creation of art, the advancement of society (through innovation or leadership) and the alleviation of suffering. At least two of these, and arguably all three, are obviously impossible in a post-apocalyptic world because of the way that survival seems to come to the forefront of such an existence. If we were to be reduced to a society of individuals scavenging for scarce resources, it is difficult to see how one would devote their life to art. There is, of course, some argument to be made for the fact that even very primitive cultures generally had some form of pictorial expression, but whether we can call this "art" is a complicated and ambiguous question.

The second item is easier to dismiss because there can be no betterment of society if there is no society. The alleviation of suffering is most difficult to dismiss because suffering in the apocalypse would likely be in abundance. However, there are still reasons to think that this is too strong a requirement for meaning in the apocalypse. To exemplify this point, I will draw an example from Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road*. The novel follows a boy and his father crossing an unidentified wasteland. At some point they come across a farmhouse where dozens of people are being held captive, and it is implied that they are being used for food. The father and son flee the scene without helping those who are trapped. This is, of course, a morally ambiguous action. However, the fact that we do not immediately condemn the father for choosing the life of his son over the welfare of strangers lends credence to the aforementioned claim that the elevation of suffering is a unilateral requirement for a meaningful existence in the apocalypse. This example does suggest a fourth possibility. Namely, that procreation might be a

meaningful pursuit. However, this seems more like a biological imperative than a normative condition, so we will set it aside for now.

However, already we have encountered an ambiguity. It is an ambiguity that stems from the dual meaning of the word “meaning.” On the one hand, “meaning” may refer to the literal intelligibility of a work, on the other, we might think that “meaning” in the important sense, refers to a kind of property which something obtains: a “meaningful” contribution to the literature, or, the “meaning” of life, etc. I suggest that these are, in fact, the same thing, and the ambiguity therefore collapses. However, this is not yet apparent as the context and purpose of this project have not yet been stated.

To that end, the purpose of this work is to broaden and deepen our philosophical understanding of meaning by subjecting it to a counterfactual analysis. Namely, to present a cogent answer to the question: if the world were in a state of apocalypse, meaning would be X. Potentially, this formulation is reductive as it suggests meaning is constituted by exactly one thing, X, and that that thing is both necessary and sufficient to constitute meaning. This will be addressed later. This project also has several supplementary aims: to understand the nature of apocalypse and its various forms, to see whether such an event would be necessarily undesirable, and to suggest an important connection between the preservation of culture and the meaning of a post-apocalyptic life.

### **Defining Apocalypse:**

The word apocalypse occurs frequently throughout this paper for the basic reason that there don't seem to be a lot of words which can reasonably take its place. The closest literal synonym might be something like “Armageddon” but that seems to carry several connotations that confuse the issue. Armageddon implies a finality and a singularity that “apocalypse” seems

to back itself away from. On the other side of the “apocalypse” we have something like “catastrophe” which doesn’t capture the paradigm shifting nature of the event(s) in question.

The nature of apocalypse is deeply embedded in human culture. But, what exactly does it mean to have an apocalypse? It’s a word that has become somewhat pervasive, and as such has lost any connection to exactitude. Most commonly, apocalypse is linked to nuclear apocalypse. The reason for this is likely that since the creation of the atomic bomb, nuclear apocalypse has been the most likely cause of human destruction. In recent years however, other possible methods have entered the popular imagination: ecological devastation, pandemic, etc. Climate change in particular seems a valid concern in that current data suggests that human ecological impact may be irreversible.

So then, does apocalypse require a definition or is it a concept as fundamental to humanity’s self-understanding as death? I find this a strong parallel. It seems plausible that since we are able to understand our own mortality individually, we can also understand the death of civilization without having to define many terms. Furthermore, the death of a person and the death of a civilization are both events that most people seem to find in some way tragic. The usual account of why this is the case is because the subject (of either death or the apocalypse) is deprived of some continuation, whether that be the continuation of one’s life or the continued existence of civilization as we know it.

However, unlike the death of a single person, I assert that apocalypse has degrees. In part, we have already demonstrated this. There have been many genocides over the course of human history. To the victims, these must have seemed apocalyptic. Similarly, there have been many natural, and man-made, disasters that have rendered large areas of land uninhabitable. However, I wish to now deepen this point by taking a point from Jacques Derrida’s essay “No Apocalypse,

Not Now” where in he makes a distinction between a limited or “clean” nuclear war, and a “total” nuclear war. This point comes out of a larger discussion about whether nuclear war (which I take to be synonymous with the apocalypse) is a new form of war, or rather an extension of humanity’s previous military proclivities. To some extent, I have already discussed this and suggested that apocalypse represents a new and real threat. This will serve to further this point.

“You will say, perhaps: but it is not the first time ... a European in the period following the war of 1870 might not have been more terrified by the "technological" image of the bombings and exterminations of the Second World War (even supposing he had been able to form such an image) than we are by the image we can construct for ourselves of a nuclear war? The logic of this argument is not devoid of value, especially if one is thinking about a limited and "clean" nuclear war. But it loses its value in the face of the hypothesis of a total nuclear war, ... Unlike the other wars, which have all been preceded by wars of more or less the same type in human memory (and gunpowder did not mark a radical break in this respect), nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event. The explosion of American bombs in 1945 ended a "classical," conventional war; it did not set off a nuclear war.” (Derrida 23).

What is Derrida trying to say here? Fundamentally, he suggests that there is a difference in kind, and not just in magnitude, between atomic weapons and conventional weapons, and therefore between a “classical” war and a nuclear war. This is not an unconventional thing to say. When the atomic bomb was first used, so little was known about radiation that many people died, not from the explosions themselves, but from the radioactive fallout following the blast. This is not only true of the victims of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also of the allied

forces at the testing ground, as well as the Americans who lived, even as far away as many hundreds of miles, near the testing ground.

But, this distinction is obvious, and not quite what Derrida has in mind when he talks about the distinction between a “clean” nuclear war and a “total” nuclear war. Ironically, the latter of these is more natural to our understanding. We have already discussed the ways in which the images of apocalypse, and especially (total) nuclear war pervade the public consciousness. A total nuclear war is an event where both participants (in the context of the Cold War this generally meant the United States and the Soviet Union) use the entirety of their nuclear arsenals, and therefore massively irradiate the planet making it uninhabitable for humans. It seems plausible that we can imagine this fate for the Earth so easily because it is so close to so many myths about the apocalypse: the world engulfed in flame.

But, what about the concept of a “clean” nuclear war? It is relatively obvious that total nuclear war would be tantamount to an apocalypse. But what about a, so-called, clean nuclear war? This is a contingency that Derrida dismisses rather quickly, however, if we look at geopolitics from the last several decades, we see the idea of a limited exchange, or a “tactical strike” again and again.

Does this concept have validity? At first glance, it would appear that it does. As Derrida concedes, nuclear weapons have been used in a classical war. In addition, nuclear weapons have been tested frequently without setting into motion an apocalypse. If something can happen once, it would follow that it could happen again. That is to say, if nuclear weapons have been used without causing an apocalypse, who is to say that they couldn't be used again and still not cause an apocalypse? This question strays into the field of nuclear endgame theory, which I am not interested in pursuing here, but I think it is sufficient to say that the odds of successfully

implementing what could be referred to as a as a “tactical strike”, that is to say an atomic weapon used on a small target with no repercussions, are fairly small. This is because the use of nuclear weapons, like the reaction that powers the device itself, is exponential. One use calls for a response, which in turn calls for a response, and so on and so forth until the so-called tactical strike has become a total nuclear war.

Another interesting point we can draw from Derrida’s analysis of atomic apocalypse is that apocalypses are textual events. He writes “The terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text. At least today apparently. And that sets us to thinking about today, our day, the presence of this present in and through that fabulous textuality” (23). One might wonder why this matters, as it seems relatively obvious that events which have not occurred can only be talked about hypothetically. However, Derrida’s goal is not merely to make note of the speculative aspect of apocalypse studies, but to resituate apocalypse studies from its supposed place in the military/scientific realm, into the domain of the humanities, and specifically literature and philosophy.

Why might this be an important maneuver, particularly for the purposes of this paper which seeks to understand meaning in the apocalypse? Primarily, as it is a textual event, the only way to understand the apocalypse, or more accurately, the only way to contextualize the apocalypse so we can make meaning out of it, is by using the backdrop of the western-literary-philosophical cannon. To show this, lets first consider the alternative. How do military-political-scientific readings of the apocalypse manifest? Only as the enumeration of data. The clearest example of this kind of analysis is nuclear endgame theory. This is a field which tries to predict how a modern “total” nuclear war might play out. An analysis like this can be understood as a

machine, into which pours raw statistical data (numbers of bombs, populations of cities, trajectories of missiles, locations of early warning systems) and out of which plops one, albeit important, number: casualties. This type of analysis is not without merit. One thing we might want to know about a nuclear exchange is how many people it will kill. It's also fair to say that this analysis is reductive in its understanding of how complicated a process it is to produce a machine that gives accurate prognostications. But, even assuming total accuracy about outcomes, which is impossible, the nuclear endgame model of apocalypse falls short in several key ways.

For one, it is reactionary more than it is preventative. The only way it might prevent the outbreak of nuclear war is by coldly quantifying the mass destruction apocalypse guarantees. This is akin the old doctrine of mutually assured destruction. Namely, that if the consequences for both sides of the engagement can be shown to outweigh the benefits, war should be averted. Part of the problem with this line of thinking is that it would seem the negatives of war always, or very nearly always, outweigh the positives, and yet, wars continue.

The other reason this kind of analysis falls short is because it leaves nothing to be said about the apocalypse itself, never mind what comes after. We have already seen that the apocalypse cannot be described purely in terms of loss of life. Rather, it is a threat to the part of humanity that strives immortalize itself in the continuing consciousness of our civilization.

Early in his essay, Derrida writes: "We are speaking of stakes that are apparently limitless for what is still now and then called humanity. People find it easy to say that in nuclear way "humanity" runs the risk of self-destruction, with nothing left over, no remainder... we have to recognize that these stakes appear in the experience of a race, or more precisely of a competition, a rivalry between two rates of speed. (Derrida 20). First, I wish to draw attention to the use of the term "limitless stakes." If we are speaking of apocalypse, I believe that this is

necessarily what we must mean. For humans, what stakes could be greater than the very fate of humanity? Whether it be by nuclear destruction, climate change, or existential threat, the apocalypse represents the ultimate threat: the complete annihilation of ourselves, or perhaps more importantly, our ability to create meaning.

I am aware that this is not a particularly satisfying definition of apocalypse. However, I am not sure it is possible to craft a tighter definition without construing the apocalypse in one way or another. For example, one large ambiguity that I have yet to address is the degree to which our ideas about the apocalypse are, or should be, informed by the religious tradition of apocalypses. Certainly, this is the oldest way of thinking about the apocalypse. It is an almost universal human myth. Further, it is comforting to think that the apocalypse is inherently meaningful because it represents the realization of some divine plan. This would also seem to suggest that the apocalypse is not the end of everything, but rather the beginning of something infinitely larger. This understanding of apocalypse obviously conflicts with the more secular, more modern description that I have given up till this point. How can these conflicting meanings exist under the singular moniker? I cannot answer this question except to say that it is possible for a word to have a nebulous meaning, and for multiple agents to pull at that meaning from different directions.

To that end, I will discuss four modes of apocalypse. There are, of course, an infinite number of potential apocalypses, some of which could potentially occur in the very distant future and be completely unimaginable to us. However, I do believe that it is possible to define some broad categories that will help us to home in on what it is that we mean when we say “apocalypse.”

1. Literal Apocalypse

We have discussed how the image or thought of apocalypse is one of the most pervasive signs in modern culture, and in American culture in particular. Virtually every form of entertainment from novels, to cinema, to videogames is saturated with the dystopian or the post-apocalyptic. However, this genre, as diverse as it may seem, denotes only one fairly specific form of apocalypse. This is the apocalypse that involves the total, or near total, destruction of the human species. Events that fall into this category include: nuclear annihilation, climate change which eventually makes the planet unlivable, a super deadly (but simultaneously super contagious) virus leading to a global pandemic.

We might call this version the literal apocalypse, or, to borrow from Derrida, an apocalypse of speed. When Derrida writes about the apocalypse of speed, he is, of course, only referring to the rate of technological advancement, or perhaps more accurately, the degree of technology present in our everyday lives. It is easy to see how the “speed race” represents not just a race to develop a more devastating weapon, but more generally a competition to put one ideological understanding of civilization ahead of another.

I have frequently made use of the Cold War as an example of how the ideas of speed and competition play out even as the shadow of apocalypse looms. The nuclear arms race that the United States and the Soviet Union underwent during the Cold War, is a perfect example of how the speed race manifests itself in terms of military might. However, perhaps contrary to general understanding, this is not the only area of society in which the race plays itself out.

We can understand the “space race,” for example, as being every bit as soaked in the politics of speed as the nuclear arms race. Indeed, both the US and Soviet space programs were built upon the legacies of war, as after World War II each superpower took from the ashes of the Nazi empire the scientists who would become the leading figures in rocketry in the decades to

come. And indeed, some of the reason for the great interest in “space exploration” was in order to develop technologies of war: ICBMs, spy satellites, early detection systems, the infamous “Star Wars” plan. The so-called “space race” is almost as steeped in the language of the apocalypse as the arms race itself.

Of course, even in this seemingly simple first framework of “literal apocalypse” there lies an ambiguity. Is the threat of nuclear annihilation, or some other form of total destruction, a difference in kind or a difference in degree from classical humanitarian threats.

When Jacques Derrida invokes the image of a speed race, “a rivalry between two rates of speed” (20) he means to point out a fact about the way in which modern and post-modern states have understood their relation to one another. Namely, as entities in an eternal struggle for power and control. Even now that the Cold War has “ended” geopolitics can still fundamentally be thought of as politics of speed: who has what, who knows what, and how soon will they use it. He continues, “whether it is the arms race or orders given to start a war that is itself dominated by that economy of speed throughout all the zones of its technology, a gap of a few seconds may decide irreversibly, the fate of what is still now and then called humanity – plus the fate of a few other species” (20). Speed, therefore, is the currency of apocalypse. Furthermore, “no single instant, no atom of our life ... is not marked today directly or indirectly, by that speed race” (20).

About this there can be little doubt. Speed is the ability to overwhelm one’s enemy and oneself. However, this in itself does not define the literal apocalypse because, “most classical wars were also speed races, in their preparation and in the actual pursuit of the hostilities. Are we having, today, another, a different experience of speed? Is our relation to time and to motion qualitatively different? Or must we speak prudently of an extraordinary – although qualitatively homogenous – acceleration of the same experience?” (20). The ambiguity at the heart of literal

apocalypse, and the question that each subsequent generation of human beings has sought to answer about its relation to the past, is whether the current state of affairs differs fundamentally from any previous state of affairs. Are we truly post-modern, or is this merely the latest iteration of antiquity?

The question is important because each potential answer leads us in very different directions. If nuclear war (or some other apocalyptic threat) is not different from classical war (or some other classical threat), then the threat of apocalypse seems remote. On this view, we might think that civilization has seen again and again the omens of apocalypse. And again and again civilization has endured.

Derrida seems to agree with this assessment, “the historian’s critical vigilance can always help us verify that repetitiveness; and that historian’s patience, that lucidity of memory must always shed their light on ‘nuclear criticism,’ must oblige it to decelerate, dissuade it from rushing to a conclusion on the subject of speed itself” (21).

On the other hand, if it turns out that the nature of speed, that is to say the nature of our civilization really has changed then there is a very serious existential threat to do with meaning. If our existence is fundamentally altered, then anything like a meaningful existence that was based on that existence would be fundamentally altered as well.

This turns our discussion from a question of “What is the apocalypse?” towards an analysis of how the apocalypse might be prevented. This is a question that this paper spends precious little time on for the reason that the answer is either trivial, or so complex as to preclude its being satisfactorily answered here. Perhaps the apocalypse, or at least literal apocalypse, is simple to prevent. If we are now, or ever find ourselves at a tipping point, with our fingers on the proverbial button, we have to step back and choose a path that does not lead to our own

destruction. This is easier said than done when our culture now seems so radically split along political lines. However, the “simple” solution to apocalypse assumes a culture that bends towards reason. The hope, then, is that the current political turmoil is merely the last gasp of a dying old guard that will be replaced by individuals with more sustainable values.

Of course, it is equally possible that this is not the case. If our rates of speed are now accelerating, and continuing to accelerate, the fear is that we have already tipped over the edge and are now plummeting towards a terminal understanding of our civilization. There is no clear way to arrest this momentum, and what comes after there seems to be no way to speak of.

## 2. The Inevitable Apocalypse

Hopefully, by now I have laid out the basic premise of the paper: that the potentiality for apocalypse erases much of what the western philosophical tradition has traditionally defined as meaningful existence. I think that this threat is significant enough to merit a response. However, it is worth saying here that there are certain philosophical opponents of apocalypse studies who raise valid concerns about its ethicacy.

In his introduction to *Anti-Apocalypse: Exercises in Genealogical Criticism*, Lee Quinby writes that

It is vital to understand just how much the metaphors of biblical Apocalypse guide perceptions of everyday events for most people in the United States, despite the fact that relatively few actually read the bible. Two Gallup polls from the fall of 1991 indicate how widespread certain apocalyptic notions are. An October poll indicated that 52 percent of the ‘typical’ adults polled said they believed in the devil. A November poll reported that 47 percent of the respondents agreed that ‘God created man pretty much in his present form at one time within the last 10,000 years’ while 40 percent agreed that

‘man has developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process, including man’s creation.’ These responses show that, even when people are not declared fundamentalists, they often hold to notions of divine origins and metaphysical evil” (xii).

On the face of things, it’s unclear what to make of this. Obviously, it’s slightly disturbing that 47 percent of Americans (albeit in 1991) are creationists. But what threat does this pose? And in particular, what does it have to do with apocalypse criticism. Quinby continues, that,

At stake here are the relationships between power, truth, ethics, and apocalypse. In attempting to represent the unrepresentable, the unknowable –the End, or death par excellence – apocalyptic writings are a quintessential technology of power/knowledge. They promise the defeat of death, at least for the obedient who deserve everlasting life, and the prolonged agony of destruction for those who have not obeyed the Law of the Father. One does not have to succumb to apocalyptic eschatology to understand why end-time propensities imperil democracy? The apocalyptic tenet of preordained history disavows questionings of received truth, discredits skepticism, and disarms challengers of the status quo (xiii).

I would be remised then, if in a paper about the apocalypse, I did not acknowledge Quinby’s very deft analysis of apocalypse rhetoric, particularly as it is used by certain “in groups” to maintain systems of power and control. In my understanding, his argument draws from two central points.

1. That writing/speaking about the apocalypse presupposes a sort of nihilism about the world. Namely, that the problems of the world don’t matter because it will probably be destroyed

soon anyway, or that whatever is happening in the world can best be described as God's will and we therefore cannot or should not attempt to interfere.

This is one of the most obvious and difficult challenges that any apocalypse critic must face, and, in fact, it is one that I have come across in my discussions of this project with others, and also in my search to find sufficient definitions of apocalypse.

One such objection comes from a friend of mine who wondered why I was so concerned with the apocalypse when, in her view, the apocalypse (or an apocalypse) had already transpired (referring to the mass extermination of the Jewish people and other persecuted groups during the second world war). The strong point here is, of course, that the Holocaust seems to meet the "limitless stakes" criterion for apocalypse. That "holocaust" is often used in conjunction with "nuclear" or some other apocalyptic modifier lends credence to the case for events like this falling into the category of apocalypse. The Holocaust, and other genocidal events, distinguish themselves from other events with large loss of life because what is at stake is not only people's lives, but their entire culture as well. One conclusion we might draw from this example is that apocalypse studies is really not distinct from any philo-historical study of human society: that all moments in history are merely chapters in the same speed race, different tokens, but the same type.

However, we have already admitted that the extermination of an entire people and their culture is a different sort of thing than just death on a large scale. We might think then, that the destruction of all culture poses more of a threat even than the deaths of many, many people. This, of course, is not to say that the deaths of many, many people is normatively neutral. My point is rather that the conjunction of large scale death and the loss of culture poses a different kind of threat to human civilization than those deaths alone.

Quinby's second point 2. Is that apocalypse rhetoric is necessarily rooted in a fundamentalist understanding of the world that is ultimately dangerous to both liberal democracy and untimely our freedom as individuals. The basic idea here is that embedded within what Quinby calls the "American apocalypse" is a fundamentally dangerous belief. Namely that, "its infatuation with doom, its willingness to witness cruelty in the name of righteous justice, and its belief in an elect with access to absolute truth" (xxii). It is easy to see the parallels between this worry and the current state of American politics.

When the president of the United States has been caught so many times in lies and yet his supporters continue to believe he is the only source of truth, and when he himself uses the rhetoric of apocalypse ("fire and fury") to attempt to force other countries to fall in line behind him, it is clear that the problem Quinby outlines is not a hypothetical one, but in fact very real. Even if we look beyond Quinby, to Derrida's criticism of Reagan's so-called "Star Wars" plan, we see the themes of today. "Nowhere has the dissociation between the place where competence is exercised and the place where the stakes are located ever *seemed* more rigorous, more dangerous, more catastrophic ... Is it not *apparently the first time* that dissociation ... has put the balance of the fate of ... Humanity as a whole ...at the very moment when your president is even thinking about waging war beyond the earth?" (22). If you replace "Star Wars" with Space Force Derrida's point can go entirely unamended.

So, where does this leave the state of apocalypse criticism. On the one hand, Quinby's point is well taken. The rhetoric of apocalypse is often used to instill fear and to suppress dissent. And it does often seem that it normalizes destruction in the name of salvation. However, it also seems like Quinby ignores certain facts about the world that make apocalypse studies necessary.

Mostly, the mere fact that mass destruction is always a possibility seems to suggest that we ought to think about it and its ethicacy.

### 3. The Meaningful Apocalypse

A third possible construal of apocalypse is as some type of bearer of meaning. This position is somewhat contrary to the one that Quinby holds, but it is nonetheless worth discussion. As we will see later in the paper, one of the main ways in which philosophers have historically tried to account for the meaning in life, or whether or not life has a meaning, is by way of “supernaturalism.” This is essentially the idea that life has meaning in virtue of some higher power, and that the meaning of life essentially rests upon our adherence to the will of that power. Of course, the meaning of the apocalypse depends on exactly what such a power ends up being. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the being towards whose will we ought to defer is God, and the apocalypse may either represent the salvation of the just or the damnation of the wicked. We will discuss the exact merits of this point of view in relation to meaning later, but suffice to say that it tends not to look great in light of all the inconsistencies in the world.

Another possible supernaturalist expression of meaning would be an appeal to some kind of karmic force. The idea here is that “good” actions lead to good results and “bad” actions to bad results. On this view, we might think that one’s life can be made meaningful by doing good things. But, does this supernaturalist view share the characteristic of apocalypse as meaning maker? To put that another way, in the Christian tradition apocalypse is meaningful in virtue of itself since it marks the point in time where earthly life comes to an end and eternal after life begins. It is unclear whether a karmic understanding of the universe would lead to this same result.

### 4. An Apocalypse of Signs

In *All and Nothing: A Digital Apocalypse* Martin Burckhardt and Dirk Höfer interrogate a very different type of apocalypse from the ones I have described here. This is the “digital apocalypse” or the apocalypse of signs. Their view hinges on the idea that the postmodern world has, in fact, undergone a transformation from a world where representation is done by traditional logic, to one where Boolean logic is king. To make this point clearer, let us first outline the way in which our culture has previously represented itself. There are two possibilities. Firstly, there is an aural tradition. Secondly, a textual tradition. The aural tradition is by far older, but in the end does not significantly differentiate itself from the textual tradition. Both take the core of human civilization and place it inside a physical body. This is either the body of the text, or the human body itself. But, in the age of the internet, the body has become ethereal. In digitizing, texts have removed themselves from our everyday world, and entered a space where the word “copy” has no real meaning. This is why Boolean logic becomes important. Previously, in order to replicate a text, one needed to replicate its body. That is, create a new physical housing for the text, whether it be within the binding of a book, or within the mind of a human being. Digitally, a text can be replicated merely by creating a new pointer to one and the same instance of computer memory. This memory need not even be stored on one physical computer disk, rather it can be put into “the cloud,” a network of servers which, like the bank of a river, direct the flow of information without necessarily constituting the information itself.

In Boolean logic, there are only 1s and 0s.

Boolean digits 1 and 0 do not designate a quantity; instead, they mark presence and absence. Thus, 1 stands for the universe, and 0 stands for nothingness. Nevertheless, the terms are not governed by a mutually exclusive relationship. Their relationship is complementary: they follow the same logic. Just as 1 times 1 always yields 1, and 0 times

0 always produces 0, x times x always equals x in the Boolean world. For the same reason, All and Nothing meet up in the formula  $x = x^n$ . Because x can stand for anything and everything –indeed, for the universe in its entirety –it is no exaggeration to speak of a digital world formula in this context (2).

They continue:

What is x? it is obvious: a written sign. Following our conventional way of thinking, writing is supposed to describe reality. If it manages to do so, a given body of writing counts as the fitting representation of a state of affairs, a society – or the world. But this kind of accounting, where the world and the image face each other like the painter and his model, is rendered obsolete by the formula. The programmer no longer portrays the world; instead, he intervenes in the world. The x is no longer a written sign detached from what it signifies, but an electronic formation that uncannily twins what it denotes (8).

But, what does any of this mean? Is it just a mathematical trick re-enforced by philosophical posturing? No, there is more to it than that. First, to explicate the point of the formula, imagine a file on a computer. This could be a text file, or an image, or any piece of media that can be encoded digitally. Think about how this file would need to be copied if it existed in the physical world. It would need to be copied *physically*. This means that each copy takes up as much space as the original. Now, think about our computer file. In the digital world, it is possible to copy a file on the same system without using any additional memory. The copy in this instance is simply a new directory to one and the same data on the hard drive. In this way, infinitely many copies may be made without taking up any additional space. Hence,  $x = x^n$ .

But what does this have to do with the real world? Does the apocalypse of signs really constitute an existential threat or merely a theoretical one. One might draw a parallel between Burckhardt and Höfer's work and that of Walter Benjamin in his *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. If mechanical reproduction devalues a work of art, as Benjamin suggests, then digital reproduction certainly devalues it. More than that, we might also think that it's not only works of art which are being devalued, but everything. To apply Derrida's framework, we might think that there really has been a change in the kind of our experience of speed. However, this change was not manifested, as Derrida thought, in the nuclear arms race, but in the digitization of the world.

This is the kind of "apocalypse" that we see in dystopian novels like *Fahrenheit 451* or *Brave New World*. In these novels, the world has avoided a literal apocalypse, but has still lost something important to the world. What exactly has been lost is articulated crudely and bluntly by Bradbury as a literal loss of literary texts: books are made illegal. *Brave New World* takes a subtler approach, suggesting that a purely hedonistic culture, though they still have access to the literary archive, may lose the ability to appreciate the way those texts inform our understanding of meaning in the everyday world.

To provide a more concrete example, let's return to Burckhardt and Höfer.

Another response ... involves applications like Tinder and BangWithFriends. Here, virtualization assumes even greater dimensions: a swipe on the touchscreen does away with the laborious matter of psychology altogether. Decisions occur quickly ... in a certain way, risk-free assignments give rise to behavior that would not occur in the real world.

Whatever law dating sites obey, they establish forms of communication corresponding to database logic ( $x = x^n$ ). Because human beings are finite and have a determinate sex, they cannot fulfill a complete range of possibilities. In this sense, the individual is  $x \neq x^n$ . Under such conditions, it proves impossible to content oneself with just one other person ... one is all but obliged to view one's counterpart as a kind of serial offender" (74).

This is a sill example, obviously. And furthermore, I don't want my use of it here to suggest a sort of trite, tabloid conclusion about one or another technology destroying the meaningfulness of our lives. But, I do want to point out that clearly are world has become partially digital, and the digital realm has its own laws regarding how communication transpires. Because of the way media can multiply digitally ad-infinitum, what was once concrete has become nebulous. The literary archive, once set in paper and ink, is now everywhere simultaneously. Likewise, people, who were once corporeal entities, have become able to project themselves, and therefore in some sense, copy themselves into the digital world.

Unlike the nuclear/literal apocalypse, which threatens an irreversibility condition, that is to say threatens to take us to a place where current forms of meaning are inadequate and from which we cannot return, the apocalypse of signs threatens to make meaning meaningless. It is not a threat of irreversibility, but of degradation. Burckhardt and Höfer further reinforce this point in a section they call, "Death by Selfie." "The classical self-portrait was soul-searching. Artists set out to find the shadow behind the persona. In contrast, the selfie represents an act of self-forgetting: it perceives the shadow but tries to banish it behind the membrane formed by the image. That's why there are selfies at the Louvre with the *Mona Lisa* in the background, selfies with somebody threatening to jump off a bridge, and selfies at Auschwitz. The selfie proves that

one has managed to survive the impositions of selfhood and singularity, after all ... the selfie doesn't say "I." it says "Me, too!" (78). Here we see Benjamin's thesis reinvigorated. Not only has the image become devalued, it has become the mechanism of devaluation.

### **On Meaning:**

It seems useful to interrogate what philosophers suggest constitutes meaning in an "ordinary" life. But, already there's a problem. There are over 7 billion human lives on Earth and figuring out which of them are ordinary, and which are less-than/more-than ordinary seems a) impossible and b) rooted in some kind of nasty colonial/social-Darwinist tradition which seems unproductive and ultimately self-defeating. It would, of course, be easier to say something like "an ordinary life in such-and-such a country." There are two pretty obvious problems with this: a) it seems to slice the problem both thinly and arbitrarily, and b) such an analysis has Trojan-horsed within it the notion that such-and-such a country is, in-fact, not just a model for philosophical analysis but also a socio-ethico-political model for what a country ought to be and how its people ought to behave. And, that basically winds you back to the social-Darwinist thing which we have already tried to exclude.

There's not an obvious way forward then, except to add another layer of abstraction. That is to say that though we may not be able to establish an average person in this world, we likely could imagine an idealized sort of world which is close enough to this world for us to draw similar normative conclusions. This in itself raises several questions about the nature of meaning. It would seem that in order to be able to rightfully talk about criteria for meaning, it would have to be the case that there are some criteria that universally confer meaning onto human life. However, the desperate nature of human existence makes it difficult to think of any such criteria. This leaves two possible conclusions, first that meaning is not the sort of thing that has exactly

one set of conditions for its fulfillment. The second possible, though less desirable, possibility is that only certain kinds of lives can be meaningful.

Thadius Metz's book *Meaning in Life* provides a useful overview of the potential positions a person trying to define meaning might take. I will attempt to provide an account of how those positions relate to an apocalyptic scenario.

The first viewpoint is supernaturalism, which we have already discussed to some extent. "Supernaturalism is [a] theoretical orientation [which states] one's existence is significant just insofar as one has a certain relation with some spiritual realm" (19). For our purposes, we now have to draw a distinction between apocalypse and post-apocalypse. We also now need to divide apocalypse into secular and religious. On a supernatural view of a secular apocalypse, the apocalypse itself would probably be construed as an evil that came about through the freewill of man. Therefore, theories of meaning probably wouldn't change that much. Before, the purpose of life was to carry our God's will, after should be just the same. Nothing has really changed. However, on a supernaturalist view of a religious apocalypse, the end of days represents the ultimate judgment of people. In this way, the meaning in an apocalypse is completely self-evident. It also precludes the idea of a post-apocalyptic world because the judgment is supposed to represent the terminus of life on Earth. If there were still life on Earth after some percentage of the population was raptured to heaven, as some speculative fiction has suggested, people living in that state of affairs would, it seems to me, have a hard time justifying the meaning in their lives. It seems like all options would be reduced to nihilism.

I don't find supernaturalism a particularly interesting way of looking at the apocalypse for a few reasons. Firstly, whether or not you find it a persuasive view more or less hinges entirely upon whether or not you believe in God (or some other supernatural force). And it seems

to the existence of God is more or less unverifiable. So, it doesn't seem like there is a ton to say of substance. The second reason is that the supernaturalist understanding of meaning in the apocalypse is fairly self-evident, as the above hopefully demonstrates.

A more interesting direction of study is naturalism, "Naturalism denies supernaturalism in the sense of rejecting its implication that life would be meaningless without a god or a soul" (19). Naturalism can further be subdivided into subjectivism and objectivism. "Subjectivism is the abstract idea that meaningful conditions vary, depending on the subject. According to the standard form of this theoretical stance, what is meaningful for a given person is entirely a function of that towards which she has a certain 'pro-attitude'" (19) whereas "[Objectivism maintains] certain features of our natural lives can make them meaningful, but not merely by virtue of a positive attitude towards them. Their idea is that not just any conditions could confer meaning on a person's life, no matter what her mental orientation towards it" (20).

A classic case of meaning which illustrates the difference between the objective and subjective modes of construction is the myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus, of course, was a figure in Greek myth who was condemned by the gods to a life of endless, pointless toil. His task is to roll a bolder to the top of a hill, only to watch it roll back down again and be compelled to start all over again. Albert Camus famously pointed out the metaphorical application of the story to human life, namely, that the futile toil of Sisyphus is not substantively different from human life.

One might rightfully wonder whether this is actually the case. On the surface, it certainly appears that living involves a wide variety of activities that are not qualitatively similar to the endless rolling of a bolder. Our relationships with others, the creation of art, the expansion of knowledge, the healing of the sick: these all seem to be pursuits that entail inherent meaning. A strong counterpoint is, of course, that our lives only seem meaningful in comparison to Sisyphus'

in virtue of the fact that our lives are finite and his is infinite. Painting a great work of art might appear to confer meaning on a life if that work and that artist are lauded as genius for hundreds of years, but what is left after a million years, or a billion? This is not to say that longevity is a good measure of meaning. But, if we're going to find meaning in an apocalypse, we must first confront the strong challenge of life's apparent inherent meaninglessness.

Both Camus and Richard Taylor, who writes about Sisyphus in his essay "The Meaning of Life," suggest that absurdity of Sisyphus's situation (and therefore of life) does not necessarily preclude the possibility of meaning. Camus writes that since Sisyphus' task is endless he can also derive infinite fulfillment from it, and that we must therefore imagine him happy. Taylor imagines a scenario where "the gods, while condemning Sisyphus to the fate just described, at the same time, as an afterthought, waxed perversely merciful by implanting in him a strange and irrational impulse – namely, a compulsive impulse to roll stones" (Taylor 24). This is classic subjectivism as it places more emphasis on internal experience than external result. Taylor closes his essay by noting that "the meaning of life is from within us, it is not bestowed from without, and it far exceeds in both its beauty and permanence any heaven of which men have ever dreamed or yearned for" (30).

It is a fine sentiment, to be sure. And, of course, I believe that anyone working on meaning or anyone evaluating human systems of belief must concede that in order to fit our notions of what meaning is, it must be at least partially subjective. Most people, for instance, believe that theories about how one ought to spend one's life (defacto theories of meaning) must allow for what philosophers generally call "different conceptions of the good life." It is difficult to imagine a purely objective theory of meaning that that is both narrow enough to be useful and also adheres to that principle. For example, if one were to decide that the meaning of life was to

discover new scientific truths, that would not allow for anyone whose life was not dedicated to that pursuit to count as being meaningful. You might try to fix the narrowness of the objective proposition by adding disjuncts. Namely, that the meaning of life is pursuit of scientific truth, *or* the creation of art, *or* the alleviation of suffering. The obvious problem with this is that you're probably not going to be able to come up with a truly exhaustive list of meaning makers.

Another problem with objective theories of meaning is figuring out how attainable a meaningful life should be. Many of the go-to examples for meaningful "occupations" require either extensive training, extensive access to resources, or both. According to WorldBank, nearly ten percent of the global population lives in "extreme poverty" (earning less than two dollars per day). If a theory of meaning is objective, it follows that it should also be universal. However, the range of socioeconomic statuses in the world makes this criterion difficult to fulfill. The easiest fix would be to bite the bullet and say that the circumstances of one's birth can preclude, or greatly hinder the ability of that person to lead a meaningful life. Most people, I would think, are going to be a bit squeamish about taking so large a step without exploring other possibilities of meaningfulness.

Even if a cogent theory of meaning must be partially subjective, it seems unlikely that it can be *wholly* subjective. Murder, for example, even if someone derives great pleasure and satisfaction from it, should not be allowed to count as a meaningful. Moreover, even if obvious ethical violations are excluded, it cannot be the case that any banal activity, however pleasurable or fulfilling to the agent, can constitute the basis of a meaningful life.

This, of course, leads us back to the search for sufficient, objective, meaning-conferring conditions. Of course, the possibility exists that no such conditions exist, that life is inherently meaningless, and that any meaning we do ascribe to it is merely the result of human aptitude for

pattern matching coupled with a desire for coherence. However, since that line of thought terminates rather abruptly it seems best to leave it as a last resort.

One objectivist who seems to come close to assembling a theory of meaning that allows for separate conceptions of the good life while not abandoning an external framework for evaluating the meaning of lives is Susan Wolf. Wolf begins by pointing out a difficulty with the problem that we have already touched on.

She writes, “it is unclear what exactly the question [What is the meaning of life?] is supposed to be asking. Talk of meaning in other contexts does not offer ready analogies for understanding the phrase ‘the meaning of life.’ When we ask the meaning of a word ... we want to know what it stands for what it represents. But, life is not part of a language, or of any other sort of symbolic system ... we sometimes use ‘meaning’ in nonlinguistic contexts ... in these cases, talk of meaning seems to be equivalent to talk of evidence, but the contexts in which such claims are made tend to specify what hypotheses are in question ... to ask what life means without a similarly specified context leaves us at sea” (114).

Despite this difficulty, Wolf also suggests that we do have some idea of at least one thing people mean when they say “the meaning of life.” She suggests that the question is roughly equivalent to asking what the purpose of human existence is. That is to say, why do we exist as opposed to not existing? And, is there some role we are meant to fulfill during our time on Earth?

Interestingly, Wolf suggests that, unless God exists, there is no intrinsic purpose to our lives.

On its face, that seems like a grim proposition. One that also seems to suggest that this entire project is doomed to fruitlessness. However, Wolf suggests that while life “as a whole” may be meaningless, individual lives can, in fact, have meaning. This seems like a little bit of

double talk. At the very least it sounds like cognitive dissonance, and at worst, intentional misdirection. However, I would suggest that this distinction is not incoherent, but rather a key insight into how we ought to understand meaning.

In reading Wolf, the line between subjectivism and objectivism begins to blur. In my view, subjectivism and objectivism constitute a spectrum of beliefs about meaning. In this way, it's fairly clear what subjectivism has to say about the apocalypse. That the greatest goods come from maximizing one's own survival and welfare. Even a more moderate subjectivist position would probably boil down to something like hedonism in an apocalyptic scenario because of the extreme pressures of such a situation.

An objectivist interpretation of the apocalypse is less straightforward because it depends what objective principle one thinks conforming to is sufficient to constitute a meaningful life. One good candidate is that our objective duty in the world is to maximize the welfare of others. In a post-apocalyptic world, this would probably mean caring for the ill, or taking care of those (like children) who are unable to take care of themselves. Other objective anchors seem more ambiguous. For example, in a non-apocalyptic world, the creation of art or the cultivation of knowledge seem like good candidates for things that make life meaningful. However, it also seems like part of what this relies on is the assumption that one is adding their art and knowledge to an existing tradition that will then be passed along to the next generation. If there will be no next generation, or if there is no way to pass on the work, or if there is no tradition to add to, then those things don't seem like particularly good bearers of meaning.

However, Derrida, I think, does suggest a reasonable way of understanding an objectivist apocalypse. But before we investigate it, I want to point out one more possibility about meaning in the apocalypse. This draws from Claudia Card's discussion of "grey zones." She writes that,

“gray zones, which develop wherever oppression is severe and lasting, are inhabited by victims of evil who become complicit in perpetrating on others the evils that threaten to engulf themselves ... Building on Primo Levi's reflections on the gray zone in Nazi death camps and ghettos, this essay argues that resistance is sometimes possible, although outsiders are rarely, if in a position to judge when” (1). It is quite possible that those living in an apocalyptic world are victims of severe and lasting evil, or at least are in an extreme enough position that outsiders (like us) are unable to judge them. This comes into play because a big part of what makes theories of meaning important is the normative weight behind them. One ought to live in such a way so as to make their life meaningful. This is especially true of objectivism which seeks to be prescriptive in its judgments about what makes a life meaningful. An unmeaningful life, would also be in some sense immoral. However, in an apocalyptic world, where survival is probably an agents primary concern, such a strict moral prescription does not seem tenable, at least to outsiders.

I think I have to reject this view though, for several reasons. Firstly, it's just too large of a bullet to bite and still think that discussion of the apocalypse is meaningful. While it may be plausible that outsider's cannot judge what types of things are moral and meaningful in the apocalypse, that does not necessarily mean that it is impossible to establish criteria for meaning in the apocalypse, or that it is not worthwhile to think about how such an even might change our conceptions of meaning.

The second reason that I think it makes sense to reject the “grey zones” reading of the apocalypse is because it seems to focus on too narrow a window of time after the event has taken place. Even if there were some, perhaps relatively long, period of “post-apocalyptic” time during

which survival seems like the only tenable goal, one would imagine that this period would have to end eventually, and that society would have to begin to rebuild itself.

This is another part of what I think makes study of the apocalypse interesting and meaningful in and of itself. It gives one a strangely optimistic sense of perspective. The human species has a remarkable capacity to endure. I think this is particularly noteworthy in our present situation. The outbreak of COVID-19, as I mentioned in the preface to this essay, was far closer to an apocalypse than I would have expected or hoped. There is also the possibility that the pandemic will get much worse before it gets better. And yet, from my observations of people in the world, it seems as if things are not going downhill as quickly as I would have expected. In general, I'm a fairly pessimistic person. That was part of the reason that I chose this paper topic. However, there is always the hope that people will pull together, and that things will turn out for the better rather than for the worse.

In any case, I will now return to Derrida in order to investigate what he seems to suggest might constitute meaning. What I'm going to suggest, fundamentally, is that the thing that can best constitute meaning in an apocalyptic scenario is the cultivation and protection of the literary archive.

The first important point to understand is what kinds of people are responsible for thinking about the apocalypse. We discussed this before, earlier in the paper, but I think it's good to see Derrida's methodology.

That is the first question, and thus the first reason why it is not totally irrelevant, inconsistent, to hold a colloquium on the nuclear in a space, our own, which is essentially occupied by non-experts, by questioners who doubtless don't very well know who they are, don't very well know what justifies them or what legitimates their community but

who know at least that they are not military professionals, are not professionals of strategy, diplomacy or nuclear techno-science (22).

The point he makes here is that our ordinary understanding of nuclear theory, substitute whatever kind of technological apocalypse seems likely, is that it should be mediated by scientists. However, are scientists really the best people to mediate such a discussion? Derrida thinks, no. He also raises the question of what it means to be an expert. Who are the experts in apocalypse? It is unclear. Certainly, our instinct is to put our trust in those who hold the keys to the weapons of mass destruction. Or, whatever it is that threatens the species. However, the current leaders, of the United States in particular, but of the world more generally, seem incapable of making decisions in the best interest of humanity. Another possibility for who might qualify as an expert is scientists.

I want to give this group a close look, because it is one that Derrida seems to reject because of how proximal the sciences are to the development of weapons of mass destruction. On the other hand, there is clearly some objective value to the identification of scientists with the humanist tradition. Particularly in today's political climate, where truth and facts are debated, it is important to be able to use some kind of methodology to understand the world. This method of understanding the world, we must call science. The struggle then, should not be between the sciences and the humanities, but between those who chose to use rigorous criteria to understand the world, and those who seek only to reinforce their own biases.

In any case, it is clear that we need to rethink what kind of expert it is that is qualified to speak about meaning in the apocalypse. Derrida rejects the notion we require experts in military technology in favor of the idea that it is really humanists, that is to say students of the humanities, who are best qualified to discuss things of this sort:

So we are not experts in strategy, in diplomacy, or in the techno-science known as nuclear science, we are oriented rather toward what is called not humanity but the humanities, history, literature, languages, philology, the social sciences, in short all that which in the Kantian university was situated in the inferior class of the philosophy school foreign to an exercise of power. We are specialists in discourse and in texts, all sorts of texts (22).

If we are attempting to learn what it is that makes our civilization special. I believe that the answer must be the literary-historical archive humanity has collectively built over the past several thousand years. It might be fair to say that this archive is in some ways equivalent to the “sum of human knowledge.” But beyond mere knowledge, which is replicable, there is something specific about the literary and artistic aspects of the archive that make it encompass not just the human mind, but also the soul. Technology is replicable. Discoveries are sometimes lost only to be rediscovered, or discovered independently. An apocalypse does not so much threaten our technology as it threatens to delay or revert the development of said technology. But, once the dust has settled, so to speak, the wheels of progress will be reinvigorated, and continue to turn forward. The literary texts, however, are irreplaceable insofar as they are specific reflections of the circumstances of their creation.

The works of Shakespeare, for example, could not have come to be without a certain group of people, existing in proximity to one another, reading the same texts, thinking about the same kinds of ideas, understanding themselves as part of a tradition, and then carrying that tradition forward by critiquing and reshaping it. And in so doing, Shakespeare and his various collaborators created something not only irreplaceable but timeless. The existential questions of

*Hamlet* are just as relevant now as they were at the time when they were written, and as they will be one hundred years from now.

Derrida continues:

Now what allows us perhaps to think the uniqueness of nuclear war, its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time, its absolute inventiveness, what prompts us to think even if it remains a decoy, a belief, a phantasmic projection, is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive – that is total destruction of the basis of literature and criticism. Not necessarily the destruction of humanity, of the human habitat, nor even of other discourses (arts or sciences), nor even indeed of poetry or the epic; these latter might reconstitute their living process and their archive, at least to the extent that the structure of that archive ... implies, structurally, reference to a real referent external to the archive itself (26).

All this is to say that the things that are irreplaceable about our society, and therefore the things that give our lives meaning even in an apocalyptic scenario, are those things that have constructed themselves, not in terms of qualities of the world, like the sciences, but in terms of the archive itself. We can see that literature, and particularly literary criticism, works this way because it must necessarily build off of itself. Texts cannot exist in a vacuum. They have value only because of their relation to one another, and the ways in which those relations can be defined and redefined by new generations of critics. The connections between texts is what allows us to understand the archive, and understand ourselves better in reference to those people who look at us through the pages of literary texts.

This is what I think constitutes a meaningful life, even in the context of the apocalypse. The idea of the archive as meaning bearer is, I think, especially persuasive. It does a nice job

fulfilling objectivist criteria and also does not lose, but gains importance in a post-apocalyptic world.

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