CHAPTER 7

"Does Doctor Manhattan Think?": Alan Moore's *The Watchmen* and a 'Great Books' Curriculum in the Early College Setting

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When students first receive Alan Moore's *The Watchmen* in their second year (fourth semester) of the liberal arts seminar sequence at Bard High School Early College—Cleveland, an ease falls upon the shoulders of students throughout the room. After spending weeks with René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, David Hume's *A Treatise on Human Nature,* and G. W. F. Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind*, the idea of reading a comic book feels like a lighter load. While the collection is physically much larger than something like the *Meditations*, student expectations control opening discussions about what they'll find within the story. During first reads, students glance over the pictures and focus almost exclusively on speech bubbles and plot. As deeper philosophical questions emerge about the nature of the detective novel or the counter-history hinted at by the subtext and visuality of the novel, students slowly wade into it with the intellectual seriousness that they easily grant to works they've been told are "important." While the sense of intellectual ease lessens over the course of the first week of discussion, it comes crashing down once the students realize the novel's central role in their two-year arc at Bard: the stakes of the philosophical questions we've debated are existential and global.

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The emotional punch of this realization occurs at the end of the novel. At the top of page 375 of the *Watchmen* collection, the likely antagonist looks out at an audience made up of two figures and the reader. The speaker, dressed in purple and gold, talks directly, with force and clarity. Arguably the novel's most famous panel, it depicts not the temporal moment of narrative climax, but the climactic experience, the twist for the reader and their protagonist guides. In the panel, Antagonist Adrian "Ozymandious" Veidt says, "'Do it?' Dan, I'm not a Republic serial villain. Do you think I'd explain my *masterstroke* if there remained the slightest chance of you affecting its outcome? I did it thirty-five minutes ago" (Moore 375, emphasis original). Dan, the Nite Owl, and sociopathic detective Rorschach flank Veidt's figure, producing a panoptic visage. The decision to destroy all of New York in an attempt to unify global politics around a common enemy reflects the visual structure of the panel—all eyes are on Veidt, dressed as Ozymandious, the readers/listeners staring at a simulacra that unites everyone around him in confusion and horror. The two men stand in shock in the face of this ultimate moment of hyper-rationality, where Veidt's mode of thought subverts the genre conventions of the heroes. At the moment of reveal, reader and hero expectations are thrown away in the face of excessive reason/rationality. The characteristic violence that leads to peace in other comic books comes from the victory of the villain.

Within the narrative of *Watchmen*, Veidt's reveal and its resulting shock demonstrates the political and representational density of one of the most famous graphic novels within Western fiction. Its foundation comes from the generic expectations of both the hard-boiled detective novel and the 1950s superhero comic book, and exposes them to the conclusions of their own logical chains. The subversion of genre occurs along philosophical and political bounds, using the culture of the Cold War and the 1950s to confront the dangerous overzealousness of global nuclear annihilation made viable via Mutually Assured Destruction. In the case of both the superhero and detective novel genres *Watchmen* pulls from, the shared modes of thinking valorized crack and break under the weight of their own presuppositions about truth, rationality, and the ethical value of utilitarianism. In *Watchmen*, saving lives and finding the murderer do little to stop the death of millions. Departing from the genre conventions of the graphic novel, *Watchmen* produces a far-reaching, postmodern critique of rationalism made visible by Cold War political ideologies. However, far from simply critiquing the violent hyper-rationalism associated with the political ideologies of Mutually Assured Destruction, *Watchmen* confronts

the intellectual premises and histories that undergird the faith in utilitarianism that such ideals relied upon. In the intervening years since the end of the Cold War and the changing global climate produced by the War on Terror, *Watchmen* has found ample room within the college classroom as a text that offers inroads to a history of political violence associated with American cultural dominance. This essay builds off the extant justifications of *Watchmen*'s inclusion in the college classroom to argue that its philosophical outlook on the nature of thought ought to allow it access to Great Books seminars. While the novel's critiques are narratively tied to the Cold War, in the contemporary classroom *Watchmen*'s intellectual value emerges from its deep pessimism about the potential for human thought to ward off the existential threats of our own making.

For students raised in the information age, long after the politics of surveillance and war became normalized in the wake of 9/11, *Watchmen* does not simply represent a response to postmodern war and the reckless disregard for humanity associated within the politics of "saving life."[1] By including a techno-god character in Dr. Manhattan, with knowledge of the position of every atom in the universe throughout time and space, this graphic novel moves beyond human politics toward the very metaphysical foundations of decision-making and action. *Watchmen* supports a theory of mind and decision-making that diverges heavily from traditional Enlightenment ideals found in works like René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. This essay argues that *Watchmen* belongs in a seminar class not because of its traditionally lauded critique of Cold War politics, but because of its representation of the frailty of infinite, godlike knowledge. By building on the pedagogical framework that currently valorizes *Watchmen* as a particularly powerful text vis-à-vis political critique, the epistemologies associated with utilitarianism become even more tenuous and dangerous when abstracted away from any individual political moment. Dr. Manhattan's decisions to destroy Rorschach and leave Veidt to the political ecosystem his destruction has created produce a new theory of infinite knowledge as it occurs within temporally/earthly-bound experience. Dr. Manhattan's infinite power and knowledge become, in the wake of his own decisions to kill, fundamentally arbitrary. The narrative of *Watchmen* allows students to politically and philosophically question the veracity of knowledge as a way to improve decision-making.

The particular educational context this reading of *Watchmen* comes from is a complex and unique situation, which provides a series of challenges and goals that tests the plasticity and applicability of texts to a given theme. Bard

High School Early College—Cleveland is an extension of the liberal arts college in upstate New York and the location of my first deployment of this text within a Great Books seminar. Over the last two decades, Bard College began a series of extension programs aimed at folding those on the outside of elite liberal arts programs into its mission. At many of Bard's campuses, including early colleges, prisons, and international programs in locations like Palestine and St. Petersburg, students begin their college careers with a First Year Seminar.[2] During the fall and spring of their freshman year, Bard students take a seminar sequence that introduces them to the power of struggling with massive, complicated texts. Traditionally thought of as a "Great Books" course, the First Year Seminar attempts to acclimate students to the possibilities of thinking made possible by a liberal arts curriculum. These courses include a vast array of texts that stand as indispensable to the history of Western thought, including Virgil's *The Aeneid*, Dante's *Paradise Lost*, The Bible, and St. Augustine's *Confessions*. While texts and themes change occasionally, at any one time students are tasked with spending their collective first years interrogating crucial concepts and questions.

The Bard High School Early Colleges attempt to reach out to populations heretofore underserved by both the public school system in the United States and liberal arts schools historically designed to be a path toward social mobility. While each of the hybrid campuses (Manhattan, Queens, Harlem, Newark, Cleveland, and Baltimore) designs curriculum around their particular student needs and state requirements, each shares an extended version of Bard College's First Year Seminar that spans the four semesters of their college enrollment. At Bard High School Early College—Cleveland, students are placed in a dual-enrollment program where they simultaneously earn college and high-school credit. During the first two years, students complete the core requirements of most other high-school settings. In their third year, students transition to the college program. There, they have the opportunity to graduate with both their high-school diploma and an Associate's Degree after four years. By the end of their career, students experience the intense pressure of a broad and demanding education. In order to achieve such aims, the curriculum must both challenge and support students in a manner that pushes them to question their assumptions and affirm their agency and position within their world. Exposing them to texts like *Watchmen* aims to fulfill this goal.

At Bard's Early College in Cleveland, each of the four semesters of the students' third and fourth years asks students to consider a core question.

The semester discussed herein, the last of the four-semester sequence, is "What Is Thought?" Over the course of the semester, the class exposes students to texts that challenge their presumptions about what it means to think and comprehend ideas. At the core of the seminar sits the opening conversation between René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and Moore's *Watchmen*. "What Is Thought?" aims to prove that the novel and the genre can stand on its own next to the traditionally considered "Great Works." The youth of the students, combined with the goals of the class, makes the educational situation within Bard High School Early College—Cleveland a fruitful and powerful place to test the veracity and greatness of *Watchmen* within a Great Books seminar.

Within extant literature on critical pedagogy, *Watchmen* takes up a position at the vanguard of graphic novels within the classroom. Few would argue against its inclusion in myriad literature classes: its artistic prowess, genre-confronting narrative, and deep ambivalence about the politics of its historical moment place it within a tier of literature valued for its postmodern predilections, regardless of (or despite) its formal considerations. The novel receives plaudits based on the clarity with which it enunciates the graphic novel as a tool in postmodern critique. The serialized nature of *Watchmen* allows for both issue-specific and series-long flashbacks and flash-forwards. For example, when Dr. Manhattan beams himself to Mars, the issue and the series oscillate between past and present while musing on the nature and potentiality of the future. In the first two panels of the first page of Chapter IV, Dr. Manhattan presents his knowledge of past, present, and future: "The photograph is in my hand ... They were in an amusement park, in 1959. In twelve seconds time, I drop the photograph to the sand at my feet, walking away. It's already lying there, twelve seconds into the future" (Moore 111). Dr. Manhattan can map time and space in all directions, granting him infinite knowledge of the whole of the cosmos. By the end of the novel, this knowledge, plus the ability to alter the atomic world, allows him to produce massive glass airships and life itself. In no uncertain terms, Dr. Manhattan illustrates the potential physical manifestations of infinite knowledge into the past and the future. However, this transcendental god, made out of the fruits of American ingenuity, only serves as a symbol of the frailty of human identity in the age of apocalypse. The sense of a frail, dangerous American identity has only grown since the 1980s, especially since the dawning of the current millennium.

In the wake of 9/11, the idea of American identity was once again tied tightly to existential threats to its existence. With this cataclysmic shift

within public consciousness during the early 21st century, scholars began to speak highly of the role of *Watchmen* within the college classroom. These pedagogues pointed out the clear articulations of American ideology within the bounds of the global War on Terror. James Bucky Carter points out the vast contexts made available to students in grappling with the new sense of flux and insecurity produced by the attacks on 9/11:

> Our discussions of *Watchmen* within our contact zones and safe houses offered the most clarity we found in the aftermath of 9/11, because those in power around us were in the same situation: history was still being made, the connections still being sewn together as we came to terms with horrific images of buildings on fire and a new world of uncertainty. But the novel was too vast to cover in our short time and too complex for the class's level of literary experience. (107)

Carter's broad argument about the applicability of the text to post-9/11 memories ties itself to the particulars of historical social coherence—for Americans within the depths of the nuclear age and those confronted with the everyday potential of non-military attack, *Watchmen* spoke to the incoherence of their new fears and expectations. Carter's own experiences with the novel in the classroom speak to the various political and experiential avenues made available to readers of the text. As the "literary experience" Carter speaks about gets further and further from the lived reality of students within the college classroom, a philosophical framework may offer a provocative way of analyzing *Watchmen*.

The philosophical underpinnings of American culture serve as a primary source for philosophical readings of *Watchmen*. For example, Michael Prince connects the version of superheroes found in the novel to the American belief in the liberal individual as a crucial starting point for American identity. He argues that "while all of the characters in *Watchmen* exhibit some agency panic, most of them are possessed by a personally driven vigilantism that manifests autonomy and purposeful action attributed to the liberal individual" (Prince 817). Despite the attribution of the "superhero" moniker by a series of American citizens, their systems of belief all affirm the individualistic tendency that underwrites American ideology. Their individual ability to act emerges from their ability to read and predict the actions in the world. The inaction by the surviving heroes speaks to their ability to act, or not act, toward a perceived "greater good." Prince's articulation of liberal individualism evidences its problematic underbelly.

The desire to stay separate undergirds the moral ambiguity of the choices made by characters throughout *Watchmen* and the willingness of readers to accept value in the most ardent fascists without sensing any amount of ideological inconsistency.

These inclusions of *Watchmen* within the contemporary American studies classroom speak volumes to its propensity to evaluate Cold War culture with many of the most powerful tools postmodern narrative has to offer. *Watchmen* pieces together the core presuppositions of comic-book heroes and contorts their actions and outlooks via pastiche. A hero named "Rorschach" acts to test the readers' sense of moral absolutism in the face of violence and sexism, making the fourth wall a mirror into one's own psyche. The Nite Owl, a replacement for a retired and much-loved former cop, is doubly a copy: of the prior version of his moniker, and of the always in shape, hyper-masculine version found in the visage of Batman. The willingness of the United States to remove term limits because of the necessary stability of power in the face of total global victory at the hands of Dr. Manhattan's unexpected nuclear power magnifies the underlying logic of Mutually Assured Destruction and the neo-imperialism made manifest by the US's willingness to extend its nuclear power across the Western world. The novel's manipulation of genre expectations allows it to create a group of citizens with outsized personalities and totalized belief systems that still exist within a version of the Cold War fabric of US culture. This American, or Cold War-centric, focus, however, undersells the power of the novel itself. Even when abstracted beyond the historical and cultural circumstances intrinsic to its narrative, *Watchmen* offers students insight into some of the most long-debated questions within Western intellectual history. The novel's nuanced articulation of thought and being grants it a position alongside the works of René Descartes in explicating or articulating what it means to be a thinking thing.

Others have written about the philosophical underpinnings of this graphic novel, using characters as vehicles in understanding major debates within the field. James Digiovanna, in *Watchmen and Philosophy*, brings Dr. Manhattan into conversation with the nature of identity articulated by Descartes. Digiovanna gestures toward the impossibility of overcoming fundamental disagreements without being a real superhero. Following a clear line of thinking around the question "how am I the same person when I undergo so many changes," Digiovanna shows that Dr. Manhattan's ability to split himself into pieces and see through temporality allows him to actually achieve an answer to the question (104). Godlike power requires

control over space and time, which Dr. Manhattan has in spades: "But Dr. Manhattan, by remembering both forward and backward in time, doesn't have this problem. This means that Dr. Manhattan has one superpower no one else has: he can overcome the philosophical problem of identity!" (Digiovanna 114). Dr. Manhattan's powers over the atomic world allow him to show the lengths of post-humanism necessary to crack the challenge of describing identity, a difficulty increased by changing understandings of science, technology, and the speculative power of the nuclear age. The political pressures of the Cold War produced the conditions for narrative curiosity associated with a new theory of the mind. In other words, political pressures associated with growing scientific power and progress produced a graphic novel that invented a necessary outlook on confronting hyper-rationality. In order to unearth this theory of mind, Dr. Manhattan must be put into a social context. His knowledge, on its own, presents an answer to the question of human identity; his actions, however, show that knowledge does not necessarily effect decision-making.

A close reading of *Watchmen* would be an appropriate place to start a defense of the inclusion of the novel within a Great Books seminar on the level of politics alone. In such a reading, I might point out the starting point of the novel, where the middle panel on page one foreshadows the whole of the narrative, a point of return so subtle and modernist in outlook that it gestures to the role rereading plays in coming to terms with the novel's difficulties. The page itself introduces readers to the crisp, clean lines and 3×3 panel layout that will stretch the length of the serial. The easy left-to-right, up-to-down visual layout appears natural and logical/organized, but is immediately shown to be insufficient for storytelling. The page slowly zooms out from ground level to the highest floor of a large apartment building. In doing so, each frame adds more and more context into the scene, telling the reader that limits on both space and time necessarily limit our own ability to think. Far from being a simple reiteration or retread of the philosophical debates over identity, experience, and representation, the pan up warns readers of the oppressive nature of narrative. The two speaking detectives who end the page cannot see the details of the case necessary for finding the "truth," that the killer is Ozymandious. In the middle of the opening page, this narrative arc, which visually represents the insufficiency of the eye and individual experience to find "truth," grants readers a single panel that represents the whole of the novel's arc. In walking through blood, overtop an unseen smiley face, Rorschach walks past the truck of the Veidt Company and his culprit. In the middle of the opening page, the

major forces of the novel meet in a confluence that acts as collusion: Rorschach's insistence on his "moral" narrative forged in the gutter allows him to miss the truck; the monumental, all-seeing panoptic view of the police overlooks the system of streets that carry the "real" story of the Comedian's murder; and the readers have just been shown the identity of the killer through the unrecognized breaking of the fourth wall. Despite the crisp organization of the page, the clear drawings depicting the world through realism and grittiness, and the genre conventions associated with moral clarity, the presence of a counterweight to both the "police" and "vigilante" private eye undoes their individual projects. What we know, what we can know, and our own beliefs in epistemology are undone before the reader turns the first page. The novel, however, does not leverage just the postmodern distance associated with 1980s art and satire against the hegemony of hyper-rationality—it yearns to find a way to completely undo its viability as a political position.

Another avenue of close reading might follow the failure of (super) humans to control and usurp the nature of time and apocalypse. This philosophical reading points out the failure of human thought to separate moral decisions from individuality. A central trope of *Watchmen* writ upon both the narrative itself and in the symbolic economy of images within the novel emerges out of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists' "Doomsday Clock." At the point of cataclysm at the climax of the novel, Adrian Veidt controls temporality in a seemingly totalized manner. He grants information to the reader only after his mission reaches fulfillment, pushing them thirty-five minutes into the past. When Veidt goes into a room full of televisions and sees dawning peace across the world, signified by the mobilization of military intelligence against an alien invasion, his victory pose is set to look like a clock a few minutes before midnight. Through the power of personality and planning, Veidt replaces the slow and unending march of time toward death with the power of human reason and deeply violent utilitarianism. At that moment of apparent victory, the final area of postmodern thought seems claimed by rationalism.

The two avenues of response to Veidt's apparent victory do not offer readers any real sense of hopefulness about the nature of human decision-making. On the one hand, Nite Owl and Silk Spectre, people who know that millions died at the hands of Adrian Veidt, have acclimated to living with a world of peace at any cost. Familial relations begin to heal and global capitalism seems to succeed with even greater ease. Two generations of Silk Spectre find avenues of reconciliation, and forgiveness between old

antagonists occurs. Judging by the happiness of those with knowledge of the genocide, humans seem awfully willing to assent to total biopower if it leads to an increase in their own quality of life. At the end of the graphic novel, "progress," the linear improvement of humanity over time, is granted higher moral importance than the lives of millions of New Yorkers.

If the moral flexibility isn't harrowing enough, the other potential "end" to the novel may bring ethical optimism, but pessimism about the possibilities of human reason. In the face of a slower news cycle built in the engine of "peace," a person working in a fringe newspaper seems to find Rorschach's journal. Readers aren't privy to the real contents of it, nor the responses to it from this worker or the larger world. Yet, the foreboding sense of the scene points to a cyclical nature of human temporality, one where war and peace are two sides of the same, constantly flipping coin. Without Dr. Manhattan, finding out that an American business leader killed millions would throw the geopolitical situation back into the nuclear chaos that opens the novel. The limits on the human capacity for knowledge or actual utilitarian thinking are borne out at the experience of a great lie. Veidt's gamble requires the lack of information and the guarantee of the safety of all, not just the "most." Veidt's actions are fundamentally precarious, an impossible utopia that requires one hundred percent belief in personal safety. The novel's ambivalence over the nature of human thought and relationship to temporality, between the politics of progress and inevitability of cycles between war and peace, speaks a powerful message that goes beyond the pastiche nature of postmodernism: human thought and reason cannot be a starting point for the potential of morality.

In close readings like the ones described above, names like Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, William Spanos, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Judith Butler could be used to support the interesting representational choices of the novel. A more political reading might even talk about how the novel presages contemporary (non-)debates over the deaths of civilians in the global War on Terror, the rise of businessmen as political strongmen within Western democracies, and the ease of secrecy within the elite to keep the populace controlled. In each of these arcs, the novel might creep into the category of a "great" work, worthy of being read alongside philosophical and historical texts in humanities seminars. The real proof of this claim, however, is found in the novel's ability to produce a theory of the mind that critiques Enlightenment philosophy at its core. The particular strength of *Watchmen* comes from students' ability to formulate a theory of mind and thought that supports a merger of

philosophy and politics, particularly by illustrating how political decisions offer counter-evidence for philosophical presupposition. Based on the experiences in the seminar class made up of young college students, centering the discussions on *Watchmen* allowed for a critique of Descartes through the production of an interpretation of "thought" found in the combination of content and form.

Within the space of the classroom, students quickly pointed out the role surprise plays in the novel's shift toward a stable, peaceful society at its conclusion, even with nuclear weapons. "He killed everyone!" said one student as we moved on to the second half of the text. The deep debate that followed our reading of Veidt's decision to destroy New York used the vocabulary from a previous semester on morality. Frameworks like "utilitarianism" were used to describe the decision; "moral absolutism" was placed on Rorschach as students analyzed the panel where he yells his final words to Nite Owl: "Never compromise" (Moore 402). Students debated about the justifications each character had for their moral outlook, wondering aloud if morals were a way of thinking or a way of acting. As the conversation continued, the subject shifted toward Dr. Manhattan's decision to kill Rorschach at the end, an addition that proved pivotal to the theorization about thought that followed from Descartes. The central political conceits of the novel, the battle between utilitarianism and deontology, between "I did it thirty-five minutes ago" and "never compromise," provide ample opportunities for students to engage in questions about moral decision-making. Dr. Manhattan allowed them to talk about the nature of thought, and how power and morality fundamentally affect that process.

Descartes' third meditation focuses on what knowledge can be built from the *cogito*. The argument for the existence of God that emerges from the third meditation sounds in many ways like Dr. Manhattan: "a substance infinite, independent, all-knowing, all-powerful ... the more attentively I consider them the less I feel persuaded that the idea of them owes its origin to myself alone" (Descartes 93). The finitude of human minds cannot produce a complete articulation of God. The experiential interactions characters have with Dr. Manhattan also follow this line of reasoning. Dr. Manhattan's immense power and ability to be everywhere at once means there is no singular point of experience that necessitates the fullness of his being. For example, Silk Spectre/Laurie Juspeczyk recoils at the idea of making love to many Dr. Manhattans at once and becomes even more upset at the fact that other incarnations of Dr. Manhattan continue to work on his science projects as they have sex. Here, Silk Spectre's reaction shows

the proof of the Cartesian assessment; however, the immensity of Dr. Manhattan's power and increasing separation from human thought do not show that it can encompass his decision-making prowess. In other words, Descartes' argument that "he cannot be a deceiver, since . . . all fraud and deception spring from some defect" (97) is experientially untrue. Infinite access to information does not alter the nature of a decision-making framework. Deception, fraud, and other forms of morally problematic actions can still spring from omnipotence and omniscience. As one student put it, Dr. Manhattan's decision to eventually create life produces fear in the reader because the figure with the power to create sentience also allows for mass death for utilitarian reasons. That he will, eventually, create life does not mean his infinite knowledge produces moral righteousness. For students today, Dr. Manhattan's decision has very little to do with a political situation in particular and very much to do with the nature of human thought. *Watchmen* proves that omnipotence does not, in fact, separate gods from the frailty of the human imagination.

Beyond the fear of godly revenge sits a potential affirmation in human nature. In their reading of *Watchmen*, students recognized that the finitude of human experience is not a defect and, even if it could be seen as such, necessarily means that anything other than finitude is simply incomprehensible. The relationship between Dr. Manhattan and Silk Spectre easily draws the attention of students because of its doubly problematic nature: first because of the youth of Silk Spectre and second because of the apparently infinite knowledge Dr. Manhattan achieves through his very being. Despite this power dichotomy, by the end of the book students are unsurprised by the eventual coupling between Silk Spectre and Nite Owl. Both Silk Spectre and Dr. Manhattan are confused and off-put by their lover's reaction during their sexual moments, insinuating that even within the infinitude of omnipotence and omniscience, understanding remains difficult and outside the bounds of knowledge. In other words, the concept of the "good," or honesty, does not emerge naturally from the infinite mind of Dr. Manhattan, nor does it produce empathy. His access to the very neurons that fire in Silk Spectre's brain do not produce empathy, understanding, or, more importantly, knowledge of her desire. Knowledge of the mechanics of thought does not produce the knowledge one has of oneself. For *Watchmen*, not only does Descartes misunderstand the nature of God, he does so by undercutting self-realization.

Watchmen's theory of mind argues for the radical separation and independence of thoughts even within the world of an all-knowing, godlike figure. Dr. Manhattan's actions in killing Rorschach and leaving Veidt show

that arbitrariness is ontologically consistent with human thought. Despite the knowledge that Dr. Manhattan could ensure the safety and security of the globe for eternity, at the end of the graphic novel, history remains indeterminate for readers. Veidt's utopia, the success of global commercialization, and the potential undoing of the project due to Rorschach's journal are left in a cloud of uncertainty. Despite our own limited knowledge of the future, shared with the humans within the novel, Dr. Manhattan shows no signs of not knowing what the future holds. For example, in Dr. Manhattan's last panel, he smirks at Veidt as he says "*Nothing* ends, Adrian. Nothing *ever* ends" (Moore 409, emphasis original). His decision to leave the Earth, then, speaks to his own indifference to human suffering. It also begs the question of his killing of Rorschach. Questions emerge about Dr. Manhattan's very nature, and whether or not his infinite capacity to think really makes him an arbiter of moral good. If his journal was to be found, why leave Rorschach dead? Simply because he asked? Why destroy life, if not to save more of it? If his journal is not going to be found, and killing Rorschach is a final act of helping humanity, then Veidt wins and the entire pastiche of superhero narratives rolls over in the face of violent utilitarianism and consumerism. The irreconcilable nature of Dr. Manhattan does not reduce to the goodness of Descartes' God; rather, it proves that infinite power still acts in the arbitrary manner of human frailty. In other words, the difference between God's knowledge and power and humanity's is one of scale, not quality.

In terms of a theory of mind and of thought, *Watchmen*'s answer to the role of God in how we know we are thinking beings is pessimistic and vague. The pastiche the graphic novel levies against Cold War politics produces a version of an all-powerful, godlike figure who either claims an interest in the killing as much as the saving of human lives, or wholeheartedly endorses the deaths of millions for the good of billions (and the survival of capitalism). While Cold War politics gained *Watchmen* entrance into the college classroom, its deep ambivalence about the meaning of infinite thought illustrates that it does not require that position in order to fit within academe. In fact, as existential crises change and students are faced with their own form of potentially infinite knowledge in the face of the internet, Dr. Manhattan offers a way of understanding the position global politics finds itself in with the persistence of nuclear weapons. In arguing against Descartes' *cogito*, *Watchmen* offers a theory of mind and thought that proves that, even with full knowledge, evil, genocide, and techno-capitalism remain fully possible. At the end of *Watchmen*, students see two roads diverging in a wood and in neither case does the accumulation of knowledge or the nature of thought

lead toward moral or ethical perfection. The scariest aspect of *Watchmen* is that Dr. Manhattan's infinite knowledge and power still result in revenge-driven murder and the ascent to genocide. For students who have always lived in an age of nuclear weapons and a politics of global war, *Watchmen* offers an opportunity to see how limited perspectives manifest and allow for all manner of violent actions. Even in the face of immense power, actions do not, and cannot, be judged purely on outcome and results. Gods themselves act out of revenge, and should be viewed with deep skepticism.

Notes

1. See William V. Spanos, *America's Shadow* for an analysis of the destructive drive associated with maintaining the United States' version of capitalism globally via war-making: "It should not be overlooked that this . . . discourse repeats in *thought* the violence in *practice* to which the American officer in Vietnam synecdochically referred when he declared that '[w]e had to destroy Ben Tre in order to save it'" (204).
2. For more information about Bard College's First Year Seminar, see: www.bard.edu/fysem

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