

GRAND NARRATIVES, METAMODERNISM, AND GLOBAL ETHICS

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ABSTRACT: Some philosophers contend that to effectively address problems such our global environmental crisis, humans must collectively embrace a polyphonic, environmentalist grand narrative, very different from the narratives accepted by modernists. Cultural theorists who write about metamodernism likewise discuss the recent return to a belief in narratives, and contend that our society's current approach to narratives is very different from that of the modernists. In this paper, I articulate these philosophers' and cultural theorists' positions, and I highlight and explore interconnections between them. Additionally, I argue that if the authors I discuss are correct, then we morally *ought* to embrace a metamodernist, polyphonic, environmentalist grand narrative, in order to effectively address an array of global crises. Such a grand narrative is a necessary ingredient of an adequate global ethics.

KEYWORDS: Metamodernism; Grand Narratives; Metanarratives; Structure of Feeling; Arran Gare; Global Ethics

Arran Gare argues that, in order to effectively address global political issues such as our environmental crisis, we as humans will need to embrace a new grand narrative, and coordinate our actions in accordance with it. He contends that grand narratives have functional, practical value in helping us to organize communities and orient our actions toward the successful completion of large-scale projects. In order to be most effective, our acceptance of these grand narratives would need to be merely provisional; we should invite and be open to challenges from those with alternative views, we should be willing to revise our own narratives in light of legitimate challenges, and our narrative should be polyphonic – giving due credit to diverse perspectives.

Cultural theorists who write about an array of different notions, each called 'metamodernism', likewise discuss the belief in grand narratives, and some write about

those narratives' practical value. These theorists commonly agree that, in our current western world, our approach to grand narratives is much different from that of past modernists. Now, grand narratives are not accepted as inevitable, but purely provisionally and 'as if' they were actually true. Additionally, grand narratives are open to revision after being reasonably challenged by those with diverse perspectives.

In this paper, I relate Gare's theory of narratives to the work of cultural theorists who write about a constellation of different notions, each called 'metamodernism'. The first part of this paper articulates Gare's discussions of the value of grand narratives, and it builds on Gare's theory by discussing the work of philosophers such as David Carr and Andrew Kirkpatrick. The second and third parts of this paper articulate how Gare's account of grand narratives relates to the work of theorists of metamodernism such as Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker, Seth Abramson, and Alexandra Dumitrescu. I provide Gare's explanation of the value of polyphonic narratives that are provisional and encourage alternatives, and I describe the ways in which some theories of metamodernism appear to describe similar, polyphonic narratives.

My goal in this paper is not to argue that any of the theorists it discusses is either correct or incorrect. Instead, my goal is to articulate their positions and to highlight and explore the interconnections between them. There is one exception – one moment in which this paper is evaluative: I will argue that, in light of Gare's approach, he ought to call for humans to embrace a metamodernist grand narrative rather than postmodernist one.

Ultimately, I will defend a normative, ethical conclusion, framed as a conditional. I will argue that if the theorists I discuss in this paper are correct about the practical value of the sort of metamodern grand narrative they describe, then we as humans morally ought to embrace and seek to live according to that sort of narrative. By doing so, we might better work together to respond to global crises. What makes my conclusion unique and different from conclusions posed by Gare and Kirkpatrick is that I advocate for a particularly *metamodern* grand narrative; I explore how this narrative draws from the work of cultural theorists and how it stands in relation to the new metamodern structure of feeling they claim is now dominant in the western world.

I. THE VALUE OF GRAND NARRATIVES

Gare understands a narrative as 'the mode of discourse that tells a story'.¹ Narratives, which provide accounts of events happening over time, tend to be about people who

¹ Arran Gare, 'Towards an Environmentalist Grand Narrative', in Brendan Gleeson and Nicholas Low (eds.), *Governing for the Environment: Global Problems, Ethics, and Democracy*, Houndmills, Palgrave, 2001, p. 106.

have projects, goals, and perspectives,² and who perform actions and have intentional states such as desires, beliefs, and values.³ According to most of the narratives we create, people, actions, and projects come into conflict, and only some prevail. Sometimes the subject or principal hero of a narrative is an individual person, and sometimes it is a collective group, which can range from a group of two people to a group consisting of ‘humanity as a whole’.⁴ According to Gare, humans make sense of their world through such narratives – through the stories we tell ourselves and others.⁵ Some people construct and share fictional narratives, but humans in general are inclined to organize the events of their own, real lives into narratives – into stories we tell ourselves and/or others.⁶

Gare agrees with Carr’s contention that the act of creating a narrative is a constitutive part of many complex actions.⁷ Carr considers as examples ‘long-term and complicated undertakings’ which we designate as actions such as ‘writing a book, getting an education, raising a child’.⁸ According to Carr, while we are involved in complicated undertakings like this, we often need to tell ourselves stories about what we are doing – stories complete with a beginning, a middle, and an end at which we have achieved our goals. It is only by telling ourselves these stories that we can clarify to ourselves what we are doing, and orient ourselves in relation to our intended ends.⁹ Telling ourselves narrative stories about our undertakings can help us to determine if we have gone off track, to organize and plan, and to determine if we need to change our tactics in response to changing circumstances.¹⁰ We do not organize our experiences into narratives only after our endeavors are complete. Instead, narrative stories play a functional role in assisting us to complete undertakings while they are ongoing. Carr claims that the performance of complex actions can be viewed as ‘a

² Gare, ‘Toward an Environmentalist’, p. 106.

³ Jerome Bruner, ‘The Narrative Construction of Reality’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, 1991, pp. 4 & 6-7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁵ Arran E Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 62.

⁶ Bruner, ‘The Narrative Construction’, p. 18; David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, Bloomington/Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 4-5; Andrew Kirkpatrick, ‘Modernity, Post-Modernity and Proto-Historicism: Reorienting Humanity Through a New Sense of Narrative Emplotment’, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2014, p. 60.

⁷ Arran Gare, ‘Narratives and the Ethics and Politics of Environmentalism: The Transformative Power of Stories’, *Theory & Science*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2001, <http://theoryandscience.icaap.org/content/volo02.001/04gare.html>; Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, p. 61.

⁸ Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, p. 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 71 & 87.

process of telling ourselves stories, listening to those stories, and acting them out or living them through.¹¹ Gare agrees that we can conceive of many actions as ‘told in being lived and lived in being told.’¹² Ultimately, our everyday actions and experiences have narrative structure regardless of whether we explicitly verbalize narratives to ourselves or to others; we engage in ‘interior narration’ that may or may not be explicitly linguistic.¹³

Have you ever lost track of what you are doing, in your day-to-day life? Sometimes, even though we are aware of *what* we are doing, such as going upstairs or picking up our keys, we suddenly forget *why* we are doing it. On a larger scale, we might also lose track of how actions we perform on any given day relate to our longer-term goals and projects. Telling ourselves our own stories – creating narratives about ourselves performing the actions necessary to achieve our goals – can help us to make sense of our own actions, and to help us to get back on track if we have gone astray.¹⁴ Likewise, if something interrupts us from our plans, telling ourselves these stories can help remind us where we stand and what we need to do.¹⁵ Gare writes that ‘we only know what to do when we know what story or stories we find ourselves a part of.’¹⁶ Likewise, when our life circumstances change in unexpected ways, reminding ourselves of the stories we have been trying to live out can have a practical function. Reminding ourselves of these stories can help us to determine if we will need to either change our new circumstances in order to accommodate our stories, or alternatively change our stories to accommodate circumstances.¹⁷

Gare also focuses on the value of narratives in which a group is the subject and hero, rather than an individual person. Groups of people who have common goals and projects can share stories about how those projects will be accomplished, and evaluate possible actions in terms of how well they advance the stories toward desired

¹¹ Ibid., p. 61.

¹² Ibid.; Gare, ‘Narratives and the Ethics’. Alisdair MacIntyre, who influenced both Carr and Gare, likewise writes that “we all live out narratives in our lives and we understand our lives in terms of narratives that we live out . . . Stories are lived before they are told – except in the case of fiction” (Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, p. 212.)

¹³ Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, pp. 62-63.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 87; Gare, ‘Narratives and the Ethics’.

¹⁵ Gare, ‘Narratives and the Ethics’; Kirkpatrick, ‘Modernity, Post-Modernity, and Proto-Historicism,’ p. 60.

¹⁶ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental*, p. 139; Gare also quotes MacIntyre who similarly writes: ‘I can only answer the question “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”’ (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 216).

¹⁷ Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, pp. 61, 71, & 87.

conclusions.¹⁸ A group's leader might tell its members a story in which individual group members perform different tasks and together bring their goals to fruition. By telling this story to the group's members, the leader can help the group to organize and distribute tasks. Additionally, Gare claims, a narrative story like this can help group members to 'define their unique situations and contributions in relation to the broader project'.¹⁹ Each individual then can work toward personal goals and engage in projects which are subordinate to the group's greater goals and projects.

Consider, for example, a specific sort of group, namely a team of scientists. We might imagine that its members consciously consider themselves members of a group, and identify themselves that way. In the association between these scientists, we can imagine that a group-subject is formed, which does not however obliterate the individuality of the scientists who compose it.²⁰ According to Gare, collective subjects like this are sometimes necessary to achieve goals, requiring large-scale joint action, that are beyond what any one individual can achieve on his/her own.²¹

We can imagine that the leader of this group of scientists tells its members a story in which the group is the subject which successfully overcomes obstacles and achieves large-scale plans. If the group's members believe and accept the story as an account of what the group should do, then Carr claims that the story would become constitutive of the 'group's existence and activity'.²² This story might help the group to determine which member will perform which tasks, and how achieving those different smaller tasks will work toward greater goals. As already suggested, the narratives an individual creates for him/herself, in which a single person is subject and hero, can in many ways help that individual achieve success in life. So too, narratives in which a group is the subject and hero can help the group's members in much the same ways – to organize their pursuits, to evaluate and make sense of their actions, and to change their behaviors in response to a changing world.²³

We might imagine that the team of scientists itself belongs to an even larger group, namely the scientific community as a whole. Carr contends that the scientific community can make progress in pursuit of truth over numerous generations, with each team of scientists picking up where those, before, have left off.²⁴ We might

¹⁸ Gare, 'Narratives and the Ethics'.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For further discussion of such group-subjects, see: Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, p. 153.

²¹ Gare, 'Toward an Environmentalist', p. 111; Gare, 'Narratives and the Ethics'.

²² Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, p. 156.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, pp. 105, 112, 114-115, & 129.

consider this group – the scientific community – to be the subject of its own narratives and stories. Some people have, rightly or wrongly, made this group the subject of a narrative in which progress is defined as ‘the growth of scientific knowledge to culminate in timeless knowledge of the eternal laws of nature.’²⁵ We might say that each team of scientists, beyond achieving its own projects, also contributes to the larger community’s even greater project, just like each individual member of a team contributes to the team’s bigger projects. And just like stories in which the team is the subject are necessary for the team’s members to coordinate their activities, evaluate and make sense of their actions, and change tactics in a changing world, so too stories in which the scientific community is the subject and hero are necessary for its members for the same reasons. According to Gare, since a community like this has projects which ‘transcend the lives of individuals,’ the community’s stories would need to be ‘passed on from generation to generation,’ so that each new generation could orient itself toward contributing to continuing projects.²⁶

Some theorists have thought that groups like the scientific community belong to even larger groups, which have even greater projects and goals, and which are also the subjects and heroes of narratives.²⁷ Perhaps the scientific community belongs to a capitalist society which, as Gare notes, some people consider to be the subject of a narrative according to which there will be greater and greater wealth for all, eventually leading to the end of oppression and poverty.²⁸ Perhaps the scientific community belongs to an even greater group, namely humanity itself. Gare notes that Christians during the Roman Empire defined themselves ‘in terms of participation in humanity’s cumulative advance towards a final state of perfection.’²⁹ Or perhaps, as some Marxists have posed, humanity is the subject of a story according to which history is progressing through ‘class struggle and revolution to socialism and a communist world order,’³⁰ arriving at ‘the liberation of the exploited.’³¹

²⁵ Gare, ‘Narratives and the Ethics’; also see: Gare, ‘Toward an Environmentalist’, p. 111; Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, p. 134.

²⁶ Gare, ‘Narratives and the Ethics’.

²⁷ Gare writes that the subject of a narrative could be as large as humanity, itself: Gare, ‘Toward an Environmentalist,’ p. 107.

²⁸ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environment*, p. 10; also see: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Georges Van Den Abbeele (trans.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 155.

²⁹ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environment*, p. 4.

³⁰ Perez Zagorin, ‘History, the Referent, and Narrative Reflection on Postmodernism Now’, *History and Theory*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1999, p. 6.

³¹ Arran Gare, ‘The Postmodernism of Deep Ecology, the Deep Ecology of Postmodernism, and Grand Narratives’, in Eric Katz, Andrew Light, and David Rothenberg (eds.), *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2000, p. 198.

Gare contends that there is a need for grand narratives in order to face global crises.³² Remember that, according to him, we often need to participate in groups, which distribute tasks, in order to accomplish projects that are beyond our own capabilities. And recall that each group's members need to share narratives, according to which their group is the subject and hero, in order to successfully accomplish their projects. Recall that, according to Gare, those groups will need to belong to even larger groups, some of which persist across many generations, in order to accomplish projects that are beyond the smaller group's capabilities. And those larger groups, too, will need narratives in which they are the subject, for much the same reason. So, to successfully face truly global crises, Gare claims we will need grand narratives, describing how people from across the globe will work together over many generations to meet common goals.³³

Gare focuses in particular on the global environmental crisis. He claims that, to address this crisis, humans must create and embrace a new grand narrative in which one of the ultimate ends of a global society is 'a world order which is environmentally sustainable.'³⁴ Andrew Kirkpatrick writes: 'Without an overarching grand narrative to provide a joint orientation for humanity, it becomes impossible for us to imagine, organize, and act collectively on a large-scale problem like climate change.'³⁵

According to Gare, the collective subject of our new, environmentalist narrative would endeavor to create a world which not only promotes human welfare, but also allows diverse cultures, biological ecosystems and species to flourish. In order for this new narrative to best help those who embrace it to coordinate their activities and orient themselves toward goals, it would be important for the narrative to describe the paths that different individuals, nations, and local groups would need to follow in order to create a better world.³⁶ How would a plurality of diverse individuals, nations, and

³² Gare, 'Narratives and the Ethics'.

³³ Gare, 'Narratives and the Ethics'; Arran Gare, 'MacIntyre, Narratives, and Environmental Ethics', *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1998, p. 14. On a related but different note, Krzysztof Brzechczyn maintains that it is not possible 'to make do without metanarratives' because, in a globalized world of 'growing interdependencies', we will need metanarratives to help 'predict and explain the consequences of human actions' (Krzysztof Brzechczyn, 'In Defence of Metanarrative in the Philosophy of History', *Interstitio. East European Review of Historical Anthropology*, vol. 2, no. 1(3), 2008, p. 19). And finally, Kerwin Lee Klein writes that although 'master narrative . . . has become something to avoid . . . our global situations demand stories that can describe and explain the worldwide interaction of diverse cultures and communities' (Kerwin Lee Klein, 'In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and the People Without History', *History and Theory*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1995, p. 275).

³⁴ Gare, 'Narratives and the Ethics'; also see: Gare, Arran. 'MacIntyre, Narratives', p. 19.

³⁵ Kirkpatrick, 'Modernity, Post-Modernity, and Proto-Historicism', p. 72.

³⁶ Gare, 'Toward an Environmentalist', p. 116; Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental*, pp. 140 & 159.

groups work together, over numerous generations, to progress forward? What goals would specific individuals and groups pursue now in order to contribute to the larger, collective project which may take many years to accomplish? What policies would nations adopt, and what battles would need to be fought? Our new grand narrative would need to relate the interests and goals of various individuals and regional organizations to this global goal,³⁷ and many individuals' and local groups' narratives would need to be reformulated to be consistent with the pursuit of greater ends.³⁸ Individuals would need to evaluate their own goals and projects – and even their own, personal narratives – in light of whether they contribute to the grand narrative.³⁹ According to the grand narrative, in addition to humans, nonhuman plants and animals would also be agents with their own valuable perspectives on the world.⁴⁰ We would not treat them merely as objects or instruments of the narrative, but instead as subjects like ourselves.

Gare contends that humans are able to create and embrace new narratives, different from those which they inherit from their families and pre-existing cultures. Jean-François Lyotard notes that even before a person is born, he/she is already the referent in stories recounted by parents, families, and their friends.⁴¹ Alasdair MacIntyre similarly notes that most individuals play roles in other people's narratives as well as in their own. We have expectations and hopes about how others will behave.⁴² MacIntyre further maintains that we are born into different roles, such as being a cousin, a sister, or a citizen of a particular city, and that these roles partially determine what is good for us.⁴³ The actions that are good for someone who is born a cousin but not a brother could, in some circumstances, be very different from the actions that are good for someone who is born a brother. Yet Gare insists that we can also create new narratives, share them with others, and choose to live according to them, even if doing so might sometimes mean that we do not fulfill the expectations and hopes that others have for us. We can envisage new possibilities, and challenge and replace the prevailing narratives and traditions we have inherited with new narratives, which can help us to achieve new goals we have chosen for ourselves as authentic authors of our

³⁷ Gare, 'MacIntyre, Narratives', p. 19.

³⁸ Gare, 'The Postmodernism of Deep Ecology', p. 210.

³⁹ Gare, Postmodernism and the Environmental, p. 140.

⁴⁰ Ibid..

⁴¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (eds.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 15. Similarly, see: Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, p. 84.

⁴² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 213-214.

⁴³ Ibid., 220; also see: Gare, 'MacIntyre, Narratives', p. 5.

own lives.⁴⁴ Carr likewise claims that there is no necessity that any one of us choose to act out the expectations of the roles into which we are born. Instead, we have the freedom to choose whether or not to fulfill those expectations.⁴⁵

Gare encourages us, collectively, to create and embrace a new environmentalist grand narrative, different from those into which we have been socialized. Such a narrative describes a better world toward which we can progress. But Gare is clear that we ought not treat that better world as if it is a pre-determined future, or a final end toward which humans will inevitably progress.⁴⁶ We ought not think that it is indisputably true that humanity will, in fact, achieve this new grand narrative's great goals. Instead, we ought to strive, through our actions, to make the narrative true. We ought to be, in MacIntyre's words, 'a teller of stories that aspire to truth.'⁴⁷ Instead of treating our narratives like true accounts of what must happen, we can treat them much like tools which we can use to collectively organize and orient our actions and communities. Narratives can help us to carry out the projects they describe and help us make the world a better place.⁴⁸ As Kirkpatrick suggests, we should not think the future is inevitable: "We are not owed a future", he writes, and, "[t]he choices we make in the present will dictate whatever future . . . we inherit, and whether we inherit one at all."⁴⁹

II. METAMODERNISM(S) AND THE RETURN TO GRAND NARRATIVES⁵⁰

I think Gare makes a mistake when he claims that the new, environmentalist grand narrative he proposes would be *postmodernist*. Gare claims that we need a "postmodern" grand narrative' which 'can effect the required cultural

⁴⁴ Gare, 'Narratives and the Ethics'; Gare, 'MacIntyre, Narratives', p. 12; Gare, Arran. 'Narratives and Culture: The Role of Stories in Self-Creation', *Telos*, no. 122, 2002, p. 97; Kirkpatrick, 'Modernity, Post-Modernity, and Proto-Historicism', p. 64.

⁴⁵ Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, pp. 92-93.

⁴⁶ Gare, 'Towards an Environmentalist', p. 114.

⁴⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 216; also see: Kirkpatrick, 'Modernity, Post-Modernity, and Proto-Historicism', p. 65.

⁴⁸ Gare, 'Narratives and the Ethics'; for a related but distinct discussion, see: Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, p. 151n31.

⁴⁹ Kirkpatrick, 'Modernity, Post-Modernity, and Proto-Historicism', p. 73.

⁵⁰ In this part of my paper, as well as the next, I will cite both academic sources and also some sources which their authors did not intend to meet traditional academic expectations/standards. While I discuss different kinds of sources in close proximity, I do not mean to imply that the sources should be treated or read similarly. Yet non-traditional sources can share valuable insights too, and reflecting on them can provide a broader range of perspectives. Further, I do not argue that any theorists I discuss are correct, either about the views expressed in this paper or in their theories more generally.

transformation,⁵¹ and he claims that we require a “postmodernist” grand narrative’ in order to undermine the influence of the problematic, prevailing narratives according to which we currently live.⁵²

I contend that Gare’s proposal, that we need a new *postmodern* grand narrative, is problematic because the postmodern condition is characterized in terms of the rejection of grand narratives.⁵³ As Gare himself acknowledges, Lyotard famously defines ‘*postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.’⁵⁴ According to Gare, this means that people with a postmodern sensibility must show ‘incredulity toward any metadiscourse which makes appeal to some grand narrative.’⁵⁵ Lyotard writes that ‘the grand narrative has lost its credibility,’⁵⁶ and throughout his work on postmodernism, he is equally critical of Marxist and capitalist narratives.⁵⁷ Vermeulen and van den Akker claim that while the term ‘postmodern’ is a catchphrase for a plurality of different tendencies, one of its common features is an opposition to grand narratives.⁵⁸ For the purposes of this paper, I am not interested in debating a precise definition of postmodernism, but I will suppose that one of its essential features is the rejection of all grand narratives.

Gare is aware that postmodernism demands an incredulity toward grand narratives, and yet he nonetheless claims that we should strive to create a postmodernist grand narrative. Gare suggests that the environmentalist grand narrative he describes would not fall prey to a host of criticisms that theorists who study postmodernism traditionally levy against modernist grand narratives. Perhaps Gare would also contend that theorists such as Lyotard would actually be able to

⁵¹ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, p. 3.

⁵² Gare, ‘MacIntyre, Narratives’, p. 21.

⁵³ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental*, p. 65; Gare, ‘Narratives and Culture’, p. 80.

⁵⁴ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv; also see: Gare, ‘Narratives and the Ethics’.

⁵⁵ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental*, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 37.

⁵⁷ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*; also see: Gare, ‘Toward an Environmentalist’, p. 106; Stuart Sim, ‘Postmodernism and Philosophy’, in Stuart Sim (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, London, Taylor & Francis, 2001, p. 7. Seth Abramson writes about what he calls ‘postmodern scholarship’ which rejects capitalist metanarratives but is willing to embrace Marxist metanarratives (Seth Abramson, ‘Situating Zavarzadean Metamodernism’, parts 1-6, *Metamoderna*, July 16, 2015, <http://metamoderna.org/situating-zavarzadean-metamodernism-6-transcendence-of-the-dialectical-in-zavarzadean-metamodernism?lang=en>, Part #6). But if postmodernism is characterized as Lyotard famously does, and as I do in this paper, this scholarship Abramson describes would not be postmodern. Given that Lyotard treats Marx as a modernist thinker, those scholars who embrace Marxist metanarratives would likely be considered modernists, too.

⁵⁸ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, vol. 2, 2010, p. 4.

embrace the new, environmentalist grand narrative Gare describes. But regardless, it is clear – as a point of logic – that Lyotard, who defines postmodernism in terms of incredulity to all grand narratives, could not reasonably both embrace Gare’s grand narrative and also claim to belong to the postmodern condition.

It is worth noting that, in his more recent writings, Gare has not described the grand narrative for which he advocates as ‘postmodern’. Instead, as I will discuss in this paper’s Part III, he focuses on describing the narrative as polyphonic, and thus very different from the narratives of traditional modernists. It is quite possible that Gare would now agree that calling for a *postmodern* grand narrative is problematic; perhaps my remarks, here, do not amount to a criticism of his current position.⁵⁹

I would like to propose an alternative: instead of calling for the creation and mass adoption of a new postmodernist narrative, Gare could instead have sensibly called for the creation of a *metamodernist* grand narrative. In fact, theorists who have written about metamodernism have in many ways described grand narratives that are similar to that posed by Gare. To my mind, Gare’s approach sounds far more similar to that of metamodernism than to that of postmodernism.

According to Vermeulen and van den Akker, there are several very different notions which theorists have labeled as ‘metamodernism’. They claim that the notions that Mas’ud Zavarzadeh, Seth Abramson, and Alexandra Dumitrescu call ‘metamodernism’ are very different from what Vermeulen and van den Akker themselves seek to describe.⁶⁰ Further, while Vermeulen and van den Akker are very clear that metamodernism is neither a movement nor a philosophy,⁶¹ theorists such as Brent Cooper define it as a movement,⁶² Hanzi Freinacht defines it as a philosophy,⁶³

⁵⁹ I would like to thank Andrew Kirkpatrick for emphasizing these points in feedback he generously provided in response to a draft.

⁶⁰ Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, ‘Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism’, in Robin van den Akker, Alison Giobbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (eds.), *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, London and New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pp. 4-6; Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, ‘Misunderstandings and Clarifications’, *Notes on Metamodernism*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.metamodernism.com/2015/06/03/misunderstandings-and-clarifications>

⁶¹ van den Akker and Vermeulen, ‘Periodising the 2000s’, p. 5; Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Misunderstandings and Clarifications’.

⁶² Brent Cooper, “Beyond” Metamodernism: The Meta-Turn Has Come Full Circle’, *Medium.com*, April 15, 2017, <https://medium.com/the-abs-tract-organization/beyond-metamodernism-c595c6f35379>

⁶³ Hanzi Freinacht, *The Listening Society: A Metamodern Guide to Politics, Book One*, Metamoderna, 2017, pp. 14-15 & 362.

and Abramson claims it can be construed in either of these ways.⁶⁴ It is clear that these theorists are discussing different notions; there are, in a sense, many metamodernisms. These theorists do not provide alternative accounts of the same notion; instead, they write about very different topics. But even so, I note that many of these theorists nonetheless share similar approaches to grand narratives – approaches which are impossible to postmodernism.

Vermeulen and van den Akker characterize metamodernism, in part, as a structure of feeling typified by the return of debates about grand narratives.⁶⁵ Luke Turner similarly writes that ‘the discourse surrounding metamodernism engages with the resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths, whilst not forfeiting all that we’ve learnt from postmodernism.’⁶⁶ Cooper defines metamodernism in part as a movement representing ‘a post-ideological, open source, globally responsive, paradox-resolving, grand narrative.’⁶⁷ Abramson writes that one of the key principles of metamodernism is a return to a belief in metanarratives, which he claims operate as a ‘guidance mechanism’ for humans by organizing many of our smaller narratives.⁶⁸ Without them, he says that you would be ‘unanchored in the world and in your own skin.’⁶⁹ Freinacht claims that, in response to complicated crises, we need meta-narratives;⁷⁰ we need to create and be guided by new stories about humanity, society, and progress.⁷¹ During a discussion panel, van den Akker claims that one of his goals is to describe ‘tools or concepts to help you think about and construct an alternative future’, and he implies that a ‘grand narrative about where we want to be’ might serve as a tool like

⁶⁴ Seth Abramson, ‘Situating Zavarzadean Metamodernism’, parts 1-6, *Metamoderna*, July 16, 2015, <http://metamoderna.org/situating-zavarzadean-metamodernism-2-metamodernism-across-the-disciplines?lang=en>, Part #2.

⁶⁵ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, ‘Utopia, Sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism’, *Studia Neophilologica*, vol. 87, 2015, p. 55.

⁶⁶ Luke Turner, ‘Metamodernism: A Brief Introduction’, *Notes on Metamodernism*, January 10, 2015, <http://www.metamodernism.com/2015/01/12/metamodernism-a-brief-introduction/>; also see Turner’s reference to grand narratives in:

Luke Turner, ‘Metamodernist // Manifesto’, 2011, <http://www.metamodernism.org/>

⁶⁷ Cooper, ‘“Beyond” Metamodernism’.

⁶⁸ Seth Abramson, ‘Listen Up, Progressives: here’s How to Deal with a 4Chan (“Alt-Right”) Troll’, *Medium.com*, May 2, 2017, https://medium.com/@Seth_Abramson/listen-up-progressives-heres-how-to-deal-with-a-4chan-alt-right-troll-48594f59a303; also see: Seth Abramson, ‘Ten Basic Principles of Metamodernism’, *huffingtonpost.com*, December 6, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/seth-abramson/ten-key-principles-in-met_b_7143202.html

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Freinacht, *The Listening Society*, pp. 69 & 375.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

this.⁷² And during an interview, Vermeulen remarks that:

The metamodern oscillates between postmodern doubt and a modern desire for sense: for meaning, for direction. Grand narratives are as necessary as they are problematic, hope is not simply something to distrust, love not necessarily something to be ridiculed.⁷³

But what exactly is metamodernism? Vermeulen and van den Akker claim that postmodernism has receded and that a different cultural dominant, namely metamodernism, has emerged.⁷⁴ They maintain that metamodernism is what they call a ‘structure of feeling’, a notion previously explored by cultural theorist Raymond Williams.⁷⁵ They contend that metamodernism is the specific, dominant structure of feeling in the Western world today. So, in order to understand metamodernism, it will be necessary to substantially explore the notion of a structure of feeling.

Vermeulen and van den Akker articulate a structure of feeling as ‘a sentiment, or rather, still a sensibility that many people share, that many are aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down.’⁷⁶ A structure of feeling is ascribed to the experience of a particular time and place, with the structures of feeling of different generations often differing dramatically, with one perhaps being ironic and anxious while another is sincere and hopeful.⁷⁷ Since many generations are alive at once, there are also numerous structures of feeling at play at any time, and Williams treats the dominant structure of feeling as that which belongs to the generation doing the most new cultural work.⁷⁸ Like Williams, Vermeulen and van den Akker claim that by reflecting on a generation’s artwork we can best get a sense of its structure of feeling

⁷² ESMOD Berlin, ‘Abbreviated Transcript: (What Comes After) Metamodernism’, *1st Annual Panel 2014 at ESMOD Berlin for the International Masters Programme – Sustainability in Fashion*, <https://www.slideshare.net/EsmodGermanyBerlin/annual-panel-metamodernism-booklet>, p. 15.

⁷³ Editorial, ‘TANK Magazine Interviews Timotheus Vermeulen’, *Notes on Metamodernism*, February 23, 2012, <http://www.metamodernism.com/2012/02/23/tank-interviews-timotheus-vermeulen-about-metamodernism/>

⁷⁴ Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Utopia, Sort of’, p. 55; Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, pp. 3-6; van den Akker and Vermeulen, ‘Periodising the 2000s’, p. 4.

⁷⁵ Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Utopia, Sort of’, pp. 55-56; Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, p. 2; Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Misunderstandings and Clarifications’; van den Akker and Vermeulen, ‘Periodising the 2000s’, pp. 5-8.

⁷⁶ Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Utopia, Sort of’, p. 56.

⁷⁷ van den Akker and Vermeulen, ‘Periodising the 2000s’, p. 8.

⁷⁸ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*, London and New York, Verso, 2015; also see: James MacDowell, ‘The Metamodern, the Quirky and Film Criticism’, in Robin van den Akker, Alison Giobbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen (eds.), *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, London and New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pp. 28-29.

insofar as art has the ‘capacity to express a common experience of a time and place.’⁷⁹

We might, like Williams, reflect on a generation’s system of behaviors and attitudes, as well as its way of life – its ‘configuration of interests and activities.’⁸⁰ Taking all of these different elements together, Williams characterizes a structure of feeling as ‘the actual experience through which these were lived.’⁸¹ For example, consider the structure of feeling of 1840s England. Williams claims that in that period there were three major social characters: aristocratic, middle class, and working-class, each with competing values, ideals and ways of life.⁸² Williams claims that the dominant structure of feeling of that time was an expression both of the interaction of these different social characters and of the ways their publically expressed values and ideals relate to actual real-life experience.⁸³ While the dominant social character of the middle class asserted that ‘success followed effort’, and that ‘success or failure correspond to personal quality’, real life individuals were often faced with quick changes in wealth that had little to do with effort or personal character.⁸⁴ According to Williams, the novels and art of that time capture the experience of living in that period – the relations between social characters, their values, and day-to-day experience.⁸⁵ For example, in novels, the character of the tragic ‘orphan, or the child exposed by loss of fortune’, according to Williams, expresses ‘the deepest response to the reality of the way of life’. The 1840s structure of feeling is the tenor of the time identified in terms of ‘feeling much more than of thought – a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones.’⁸⁶ No doubt, this discussion of structures of feeling is vague, much like Vermeulen and van den Akker’s discussion of it, but they claim that it is *appropriate* for the account to remain vague:

If this today . . . sounds vague, it is precisely what Williams intended: it is that element of culture which circumscribes it but nonetheless cannot be traced back to any one of its individual ingredients, that element which eludes, or is left after,

⁷⁹ Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Utopia, Sort of’, p. 56; also see: van den Akker and Vermeulen, ‘Periodising the 2000s’, p. 7; finally see: Raymond Williams, ‘Film and the Dramatic Tradition’, in Raymond Williams and Michael O’Rrom, *Preface to Film*, London, Film Drama Limited, 1954, pp. 21-24; Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, Cardigan, Pathian, 2011, p. 68.

⁸⁰ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 68.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 85 & 87; also see: Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 159.

⁸⁴ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 87.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-91.

⁸⁶ Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 159; also see: MacDowell, ‘The Metamodern, the Quirky’, p. 27.

structural analysis.⁸⁷

How can we characterize the specific and recent structure of feeling, which Vermeulen and van den Akker call ‘metamodernism’? Vermeulen and van den Akker characterize it in terms of the oscillation between disparate and contrary emotions, tendencies, and perspectives, rather than in terms of their synthesis, reconciliation, or harmony.⁸⁸ They claim that metamodernism oscillates between ‘modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy . . . empathy and apathy’.⁸⁹ We might best recognize this structure of feeling by reflecting on works of art, such as the films of Wes Anderson, the director of *Rushmore* (1998), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014).⁹⁰ These films, like many other examples of recent art, seem to exemplify the sort of oscillation Vermeulen and van den Akker describe; these films show both irony and sincerity, empathy and apathy, and hope and melancholy. These films also hint at the innocence and naivety of childhood, but that naivety is always contrasted with harsh real-life experience.⁹¹

The metamodern structure of feeling is also characterized, in part, in terms of how people now feel about and experience debates and reflections concerning grand narratives. Those who experience the metamodern structure of feeling approach narratives much differently from how many modernist philosophers have in the past.

Vermeulen and van den Akker claim that individuals who experience the metamodern structure of feeling tend to approach the future with what they call ‘informed naivety’.⁹² Those who experience metamodernism share a discourse which

⁸⁷ Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Utopia, Sort of’, p. 56.

⁸⁸ van den Akker and Vermeulen, ‘Periodising the 2000s’, p. 6; Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Misunderstandings and Clarifications’.

⁸⁹ Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, pp. 5-6.

⁹⁰ Vermeulen and van den Akker appeal to Wes Anderson’s films as examples; see: ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, p. 7; also see: Turner, ‘Metamodernism: A Brief Introduction’.

⁹¹ I have discussed some of these points in a separate creative, non-academic work: Andrew J. Corsa, ‘#TribeLRT: Creative Essay on LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner’s #TAKEMEANYWHERE’, 2017, <http://www.takemethrough.com>

⁹² Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, p. 5; also see: Turner, ‘Metamodernism: A Brief’. Alexandra Dumitrescu, who writes about a different notion from Vermeulen and van den Akker but which is also called ‘metamodernism’, writes about a notion related to what they call ‘informed naivety’. She writes about a ‘higher innocence that comes after experience’ and appeals to the writings of William Blake to explore this notion; see: Alexandra Dumitrescu, ‘What is Metamodernism and Why Bother? Meditations on Metamodernism as a Period Term and as a Mode’, *Electronic Book Review*, December 4, 2016, <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/endconstruction/whybother>; Alexandra Dumitrescu, *Towards a Metamodern Literature*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Otago, 2014, pp. 13 & 19.

acknowledges that there is no pre-determined ideal future toward which humanity is necessarily progressing.⁹³ This is not to say that the future could not be better for humanity than the present, only that there is not guarantee. Further, some people now have the feeling that it might be outright false that humanity will ever, even in the distant future, achieve the kind of utopian world for which many individuals now yearn.⁹⁴ In this sense, those with the metamodern structure of feeling are *informed*.

But, according to Vermeulen and van den Akker, those with the metamodern structure of feeling nonetheless often act as if – and think as if – humanity really can and will progress forward. Even if those who experience metamodernism are aware that there is no guarantee of progress, and even if many of them would rationally doubt that great, positive progress will occur, they choose to act and think as if humanity could and will progress toward great ends. There is a sort of optimistic *naivety* about them, even if they are also aware of the chaotic nature of the world.⁹⁵ Those who experience metamodernism choose to live according to grand narratives that describe humanity collectively moving toward a far better world. And by doing so, they might, at least sometimes, better collaborate with others to make social improvements in the short term: ‘Humankind, a people, are not really going toward a natural but unknown goal, but they pretend they do so that they progress morally as well as politically.’⁹⁶

Vermeulen and van den Akker maintain that we can recognize this informed naivety in the artwork of our time. As just one of many examples,⁹⁷ Vermeulen discusses Guido van der Werve’s (2007) video artwork, *Nummer Acht, everything is going to be alright*. In this video, a figure, namely van der Werve, walks on a frozen sea just feet in front of a massive icebreaking ship which smashes the ice on which he has just walked. Certainly, the figure *knows* that the icebreaker could kill him. He is *aware* that it is breaking the ground beneath him. And yet, the figure ‘keeps on walking, seemingly unperturbed by this beast of a machine’. And Vermeulen claims that ‘for

⁹³ Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, p. 5.

⁹⁴ Timotheus Vermeulen, ‘As If’, in James Elkins and Harper Montgomery (eds.), *Beyond the Aesthetic and the Anti-Aesthetic*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013, pp. 169-170; Turner, ‘Metamodernism: A Brief’. Also see: Vermeulen & van den Akker, ‘Utopia, Sort of’, in which the authors explore the recent reappearance of the figure of utopia in the arts, and the yearning for utopia evidenced in artwork.

⁹⁵ Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, p. 5; Vermeulen, ‘As If’, pp. 169-170.

⁹⁶ Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, p. 5

⁹⁷ For discussions of many more artworks displaying both informed naivety and the yearning for utopia see: Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, pp. 9-11; and Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Utopia, Sort of’. I have also included relevant discussions in a creative, non-academic article I wrote: Andrew J. Corsa, ‘Metamodernist Genius: LaBeouf, Rönkkö & Turner’, *Writersthoughts.com*, <http://www.writersthoughts.com/MetamodernistGenius/>

me this moment, of going on in spite of perhaps better knowledge’, with the belief that ‘you will arrive somewhere, at the horizon of the camera’, is a ‘very interesting motif – a very interesting figure – that expresses a metamodern sensibility’.⁹⁸

What, in fact, are the chances that peoples from across the world will come together and dramatically change their lifestyles, laws, and businesses, in order to fully and adequately address the global environmental crisis, wide-spread human rights violations, or still too-high rates of poverty across the world? Even if we really strive to resolve environmental issues, how likely are we to resolve them? How likely are we, instead, to find environmental destruction truly devastating in the future? And yet, as Abramson writes, ‘We still have to *live* don’t we? To try to be happy? Try to create? Try to be part of a community?’⁹⁹ Abramson contends that we need to embrace a philosophy, and collectively choose to live according to grand narratives that describe how we could move forward toward resolving global issues, even if those grand narratives turn out to be ‘problematic and illusory’.¹⁰⁰ He writes: ‘What sort of philosophy could let us aim at a reconstruction of ourselves and our culture . . . that could also form part of a plan for healthy living and great creativity and even new forms of political action?’¹⁰¹ According to Abramson, metamodernists strive to live “‘as if” positive change is possible’, all the while recognizing that much of the world is in disarray.¹⁰² By living this way, we can better organize our actions with one another, ‘stave off despair’, and, perhaps, actually make positive changes.¹⁰³ While Abramson uses the term ‘metamodernism’ to refer to a different notion from that discussed by Vermeulen and van den Akker, there are nonetheless similarities in their discussions of narratives.

To be sure, Vermeulen and van den Akker themselves make no claim about whether or not humans *ought* to embrace grand narratives in general, and they do not propose any sort of specific utopian goal toward which we ought to strive. Their work is descriptive rather than prescriptive; they only ‘describe the prevalence of such a goal in contemporary culture’.¹⁰⁴ Yet other theorists, who use the term ‘metamodernism’ to discuss very different notions, sometimes do make prescriptive or normative claims.

⁹⁸ Frieze Magazine, ‘What is Metamodernism?’, YouTube Video, December 8, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH6zJULTVgQ>

⁹⁹ Seth Abramson, ‘Metamodernism: The Basics’, *huffingtonpost.com*, December 12, 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/seth-abramson/metamodernism-the-basics_b_5973184.html

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*; Abramson, ‘Ten Basic Principles’.

¹⁰¹ Abramson, ‘Metamodernism: The Basics’.

¹⁰² Abramson, ‘Ten Basic Principles’.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Misunderstandings and Clarifications’.

For example, much like Gare, Cooper calls for humans to embrace new grand narratives in order to better address global crises like the environmental crisis, but unlike Gare he calls for a metamodern grand narrative rather than a postmodern one.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, Freinacht describes a particular sort of utopian vision, which includes environmental sustainability, and claims that we, as humans, ought to strive toward realizing that vision.¹⁰⁶ And Freinacht claims that humans ought to embrace and attempt to live out a specific sort of grand narrative of which he provides a rough outline, in order to effectively change the world for the better.¹⁰⁷ Finally, while Vermeulen and van den Akker do not themselves offer any prescriptive or normative claims, they do maintain that metamodernism arose partly as a result of global crises and problems, such as the disruption of the ecosystem, climate change, and the instability of the geopolitical structure.¹⁰⁸ Many theorists now consider a belief in certain specific grand narratives to be necessary to effectively address such global crises.

III. POLYPHONIC, METAMODERNIST GRAND NARRATIVES

Gare notes that the modernist grand narratives of the past were highly problematic. Each of those grand narratives appeals to grand goals and projects, such as ‘the emancipation of the rational, the liberation of the exploited, or the creation of wealth.’¹⁰⁹ According to Gare, often the modernists identified progress in terms of ‘the total domination and control of the nonhuman world’, which could be achieved in part through ‘the advance of knowledge.’¹¹⁰ Gare contends that this leads modernists to judge people, communities, and their projects and activities by how well they appear to contribute to their grand narrative’s goals, projects, and ideal of progress.¹¹¹ Gare maintains that the modernist grand narratives tend to ‘rank people and societies by

¹⁰⁵ Brent Cooper, ‘On Metamodern Leadership: How Millennials Will Change the World’. *Medium.com*, April 10, 2018, <https://medium.com/the-abs-tract-organization/on-metamodern-leadership-87bcfgada5fg>; also see: Cooper, ‘“Beyond” Metamodernism’.

¹⁰⁶ Much of Freinacht’s book, *The Listening Society*, is dedicated to these claims, but for a snapshot, see in particular pp. 4, 69, 81, 113, 116, & 117.

¹⁰⁷ Freinacht, *The Listening Society*, pp. 240-244.

¹⁰⁸ Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Notes on Metamodernism’, p. 2; Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Misunderstandings and Clarifications’; Vermeulen and van den Akker, ‘Utopia, Sort of’, pp. 56-58; Turner, ‘Metamodernism: A Brief’.

¹⁰⁹ Gare, ‘The Postmodern of Deep Ecology’, p. 198.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹¹¹ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental*, p. 33; also see: Gare, ‘Narratives and the Ethics’; Gare, ‘Toward an Environmentalist’, pp. 110-111.

how advanced they are' and some people who embrace them then feel they can justify the 'subjection of those people defined as backwards'.¹¹²

Kerwin Lee Klein maintains that some modernists viewed history as belonging 'to some people but not to others' – as belonging to a European civilization which was perceived as most contributing toward the progress described by modernist grand narratives.¹¹³ In contrast, Klein contends that the modernists sometimes viewed other peoples as 'without history', and felt justified in subjugating and colonizing them,¹¹⁴ treating them, as Gare writes, as 'the deficient Other'.¹¹⁵

Gare claims that traditional, modernist grand narratives also tend to suppose the unquestionable truth of a single perspective.¹¹⁶ Stuart Sim likewise claims that modernists often treat their narratives as 'true and thus beyond any criticism or need of revision'.¹¹⁷ Thus, anyone who proposes or lives according to an alternative narrative, or challenges either the traditional narrative's ultimate goal or the means the traditional narrative proposes for obtaining that goal, is considered unquestionably mistaken. According to many modernists, to be justifiable, all actions and projects 'have to be shown to contribute to the realization of the ultimate goal',¹¹⁸ and those individuals who contest and do not embrace that goal, or the strategy the traditional narrative describes for achieving it, appear to modernists to lack any sort of defense.

Gare compares modernist grand narratives to heroic epics, which, he claims, are 'monologic', insofar as they only allow for the unquestionable validity of a single, unitary perspective.¹¹⁹ As Mikhail M. Bakhtin writes, 'the epic world is an utterly finished thing . . . it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it'.¹²⁰ Gare considers, for example, the pre-modern 'narrative of Christian redemption' which 'presupposes the unquestionable validity of one perspective, taking this as an absolute truth, and treating every other person who does not share this narrative' as at least mistaken, and sometimes as an obstacle to arriving at the true goal.¹²¹ Gare claims

¹¹² Arran Gare, 'Post-modernism and the Decadence of the Social Democratic State', *Democracy & Nature*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2001, pp. 79-80.

¹¹³ Klein, 'In search of Narrative Mastery', p. 275.

¹¹⁴ Ibid..

¹¹⁵ Gare, 'The Postmodernism of Deep Ecology', p. 200.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 208.

¹¹⁷ Sim, 'Postmodernism and Philosophy', p. 7.

¹¹⁸ Gare, 'Toward an Environmentalist', p. 110.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.; Gare, 'Narratives and the Ethics'.

¹²⁰ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel', in Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (trans.), Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 17.

¹²¹ Gare, 'The Postmodernism of Deep Ecology', p. 208.

that modernist narratives share this sort of monologic structure; there remains one true perspective and one true goal, and they are not open to questioning and further revision.

Gare contends that we, in the current world, ought not embrace modernist grand narratives. Instead we ought to create and embrace a narrative that gives ‘a place to the diversity of contending voices and perspectives’ and construes all people as ‘conscious, active subjects’ of the narrative.¹²²

When we embrace a new, environmentalist grand narrative, Gare maintains that we ought not to treat it as unquestionably true. Instead, our commitment to the grand narrative should be considered purely provisional and open to questioning, insofar as we should grant that there might be more promising narratives which we have not yet adequately considered.¹²³ According to Gare, we ought to encourage other people both to develop rival narratives and perspectives and also to challenge our own,¹²⁴ just as they ought to encourage us to do the same. We ought to seriously consider alternative narratives and the different aspects of the world they reveal,¹²⁵ reflecting on each narrative’s ‘achievements and limitations,’¹²⁶ and on how each narrative reveals the others’ ‘blind spots.’¹²⁷ And, Gare claims, we ought to constantly reformulate and change the grand narratives we embrace when, after considering alternatives, we recognize how they can be improved.

These narratives, which acknowledge ‘a diversity of independent voices’, are polyphonic rather than monologic; Gare claims they resemble the sorts of narratives that Bakhtin attributes to Fyodor Dostoevsky.¹²⁸ Bakhtin claims that polyphonic narratives involve ‘a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices’, and that we enter into discussions with, and learn from, all of them.¹²⁹ ‘There is’, Bakhtin writes, ‘a plurality of equally-valid consciousnesses, each with its own world.’¹³⁰ Where monologic epics present a single

¹²² Gare, ‘Narratives and the Ethics’.

¹²³ Gare, ‘Narratives and the Ethics’; Gare, ‘The Postmodernism of Deep Ecology’ p. 211; Gare, ‘Toward an Environmentalist’, p. 114; Gare, *Postmodernism and The Environmental*, p. 113.

¹²⁴ Gare, ‘Toward an Environmentalist’, p. 115.

¹²⁵ Gare, ‘The Postmodernism of Deep Ecology’, pp. 208 & 211; Gare, ‘Toward an Environmentalist’, p. 115; Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental*, p. 152.

¹²⁶ Gare, ‘The Postmodernism of Deep Ecology’, p. 207.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹²⁸ Gare, ‘Narratives and the Ethics’; Gare, ‘Toward an Environmentalist’, p. 114; Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental*, p. 140.

¹²⁹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Caryl Emerson (trans./ed.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 6.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

worldview and voice,¹³¹ a polyphonic narrative presents many.¹³² Where a monologic epic treats a variety of characters much like it treats objects¹³³ – as instruments or obstructions to a single hero's success¹³⁴ – a polyphonic narrative instead treats each person as an 'authentic reality',¹³⁵ and as 'another *I* with equal rights'.¹³⁶ According to Gare, a polyphonic narrative like this could, at least ideally, give all people due recognition, including 'the oppressed, non-Europeans and women throughout the world'.¹³⁷

Gare is clear that the kind of polyphonic grand narratives for which he advocates is very different from those typically called 'modernist'. Instead, his ideal narratives embrace the sort of pluralism and heterogeneity which theorists such as Kirkpatrick see as characteristic of postmodernism.¹³⁸ But, as already suggested, those who have a postmodern sensibility, and thus show an incredulity toward grand narratives, cannot embrace the kind of grand narratives that humans will need in order to organize, coordinate, and orient their actions so that they can effectively address global crises. Kirkpatrick writes that: 'What is required is a revival of narrative that does justice to the particulars without sacrificing the bigger picture'.¹³⁹ But it appears that this kind of grand narrative is neither postmodernist nor modernist. I propose, instead, that those who experience the metamodernist structure of feeling are capable of embracing this new kind of superior narrative – provisionally, and 'as if' if it were true. I propose that global, polyphonic grand narratives could be considered metamodernist.¹⁴⁰

A variety of theorists each of who writes about a different notion going by the

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 9; Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', p. 35.

¹³² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 34.

¹³³ Ibid., pp. 10, 18, Appendix II, p. 292-293;

¹³⁴ Gare, 'Narratives and the Ethics'.

¹³⁵ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's*, p. 10.

¹³⁶ Ibid., Appendix II, p. 292.

¹³⁷ Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental*, p. 143.

¹³⁸ Kirkpatrick, 'Modernity, Post-Modernity, and Proto-Historicism,' pp. 57-58.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁴⁰ James Surwillo claims that an appropriate symbol for the metamodern world is the Roman god Janus, who has two faces, one looking to the past and the other to the future: 'It is a symbol of the duality indicative of the present state of humankind because finally, the grand narratives of the past can solve the great problems of the future' (James Surwillo, *Metamodern Leadership: A History of the Seven Values that will Change the World*, New York, Page Publishing, 2017, p. 16; also see p. 266; Cooper, 'On Metamodern Leadership'). This seems like an apt symbol, as long as it is recognized that those who experience the metamodern structure of feeling do not embrace the same grand narratives as the modernists. According to a variety of theorists who discuss metamodernism, individuals now embrace the past modernists' *tendency* to create and live according to grand narrative, but they nonetheless embrace new, polyphonic, provisional grand narrative, instead of the old monologic, unchanging ones.

name ‘metamodernism’ can all be interpreted to endorse adopting polyphonic, grand narratives like this. For example, Alexandra Dumitrescu, who claims that metamodernism is a cultural paradigm, seems to imply that metamodernism embraces a grand narrative. At the very least, Dumitrescu provides an account of what progress could look like for humanity as a whole, writing about the ‘the collective evolution of mankind’ progressing toward ‘a dream of universal brotherhood’.¹⁴¹

Yet, according to Dumitrescu, metamodernism does not adopt modernist grand narratives or a modernist conception of progress, which, she claims, ‘deepened rather than solved the problems that humankind faces’.¹⁴² Thus, I take her to imply that those who are paradigmatically metamodern accept a different sort of grand narrative. They are open to challenges to their narratives,¹⁴³ and they embrace ‘postmodern openness to dialogue, its multiculturalism and inclusiveness of the other (women, minority groups, indigenous people)’.¹⁴⁴ It appears that, according to Dumitrescu, those who are paradigmatically metamodern would embrace a polyphonic grand narrative like that described by Gare, giving all peoples due recognition as equals, engaging in dialogue with them, carefully considering their perspectives and alternative narratives, and changing and improving their own narratives in response.¹⁴⁵

Dumitrescu contends that metamodernism favors ‘communication between subjects that are different and equal’, and ‘respecting the other without colonizing or appropriating them’.¹⁴⁶ Those who are paradigmatically metamodern can learn to challenge their current perspectives and narratives by establishing connections and engaging in dialogue with ‘*the other* – other cultures, traditions, social systems, and systems of thought’.¹⁴⁷ Only by carefully considering these different systems and narratives, and by reflecting on the strengths that they possess, can individuals come to appreciate the potential shortcomings of their own narratives and also appreciate what ‘traditions and conditionings have burdened’ them with, such as possible ‘prejudice against other cultures, conditionings relating to the superiority of European culture, etc.’¹⁴⁸ According to Dumitrescu, no people – including both those in power and those

¹⁴¹ Alexandra Dumitrescu, ‘Foretelling Metamodernity: Reformation of the Self in *Jerusalem, Messi@h* and *Rosarium Philosophorum*’, *academia.edu*, pp. 5 & 10.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁴³ Dumitrescu, *Towards a Metamodern Literature*, p. 20.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ For additional discussion reflecting this interpretation, see: Dumitrescu, *Towards a Metamodern Literature*, pp. 19 & 40-42 & 46; Dumitrescu, ‘Foretelling Metamodernity’, p. 5;

¹⁴⁶ Dumitrescu, ‘What is Metamodernism’.

¹⁴⁷ Dumitrescu, *Towards a Metamodern Literature*, p. 46.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

traditionally oppressed – should unreflectively and uncritically accept their own narratives and perspectives. Instead, we should all engage in reflective dialogue with each other. In order to address global issues, those who are paradigmatically metamodern need to coordinate with people thousands of miles away, treating each other as moral equals,¹⁴⁹ recognizing interconnections between people,¹⁵⁰ and seeing each person as part ‘of the whole of human society and history’.¹⁵¹

Dumitrescu also criticizes modernists for accepting their narratives as unquestionably correct and unchanging, regardless of the strong challenges posed by those who conceive the world differently.¹⁵² She implies – though this is not explicit in her work – that those who are paradigmatically metamodern would instead: embrace grand narratives only provisionally; encourage others to develop alternative narratives and perspectives; engage in constructive dialogue with those others; and change and improve their own narratives in light of what that dialogue reveals.¹⁵³

Dumitrescu provides, as metaphors for metamodernism: ‘a boat being built or repaired as it sails, or a palace or house under continuous construction’.¹⁵⁴ Writing about these metaphors, Abramson claims that that they are indicative of the metamodern need and desire to occupy numerous positions at once; there is a desire to sail in the current boat, but also a desire to sail in a boat that is rebuilt and repaired.¹⁵⁵ This metaphor also excellently applies to the provisional, polyphonic narratives that Gare describes. Those who embrace such a narrative not only desire to live out that narrative and contribute to the progress it describes, but also to live out whatever revised and changed narrative they have created after listening to the challenges posed by those who create and embrace alternative worldviews.

Abramson, who, as suggested earlier, also writes about a notion he calls ‘metamodernism’ and advocates for embracing grand narratives, likewise encourages individuals to constantly challenge pre-existing narratives and consider alternatives.

¹⁴⁹ Dumitrescu, ‘Fortelling Metamodernity’, p. 4.

¹⁵⁰ Alexandra Dumitrescu, ‘Romantic and Metamodern Glimpses at Self-transformation’, *academia.edu*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁵¹ Dumitrescu, *Towards a Metamodern Literature*, p. 20.

¹⁵² Alexandra Dumitrescu, ‘Interconnections in Blakean and Metamodern Space’, *Double Dialogues*, vol. 7, 2007, <http://www.doubledialogues.com/article/interconnections-in-blakean-and-metamodern-space/>

¹⁵³ For Dumitrescu’s discussion of how individuals can and should revise their worldviews in light of what they learn about the interconnections they and their theories share with others, see: Dumitrescu, ‘Interconnections in Blakean’.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Abramson, ‘Situating Zavarzadean Metamodernism’, Part IV, <http://metamoderna.org/situating-zavarzadean-metamodernism-4-what-zavarzadean-metamodernism-is-and-is-not?lang=en>

He notes that different people can adopt very different narratives which are, arguably, equally credible.¹⁵⁶ No doubt, a valid narrative must adhere to facts.¹⁵⁷ Yet it remains possible to pose rival narratives which proponents could reasonably argue adhere to facts just as well, especially if those narratives describe either what the present implies about the future, or what actions people ought to perform. Abramson implies that we ought to frequently create and consider alternative narratives, in order to test and improve, or possibly even replace, those we currently have. He writes that metamodernism ‘seeks to expand our sense of the possible by noting that multiple master narratives or metanarratives can co-exist in the same space’.¹⁵⁸ Suppose we consider alternative narratives describing either what is currently taking place, or describing how humans will achieve the goals and projects they ought to pursue moving forward. By doing so, we might recognize that there are better ways to achieve the goals we already have in mind, we might come to recognize that we should adopt different goals or different perspectives, and we might realize that certain goals and actions which we had considered nonstarters are not so impossible after all.¹⁵⁹ Abramson implies that we can, over time, arrive at better narratives by putting ‘our ideas through a trial by fire’¹⁶⁰ – by engaging in dialogue with people who have different subjectivities.¹⁶¹ According to Abramson, metamodernists embrace grand narratives only provisionally, always looking to challenge and improve them, and they accept them only conditionally – ‘only when it helps you do something generative and productive for yourself, your family, sub-community, community, or nation’.¹⁶²

Abramson engages in what he calls ‘experimental journalism’, sometimes providing alternative narratives about what current events mean for the future. For example, when the mainstream media regularly indicated that Hillary Clinton would inevitably become the democratic nominee in the States, Abramson wrote a piece of experimental journalism titled, ‘Bernie Sanders is Currently Winning the Democratic Primary Race, and I’ll Prove it To You’. Abramson claims that, in writing it, he was more concerned with offering an alternative perspective than he was with stating an absolute fact. He claims that he desired to offer readers an alternative story, which

¹⁵⁶ Abramson, ‘On Bernie Sanders’.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.; also see: Zagorin, ‘History, the Referent’, pp. 18-20.

¹⁵⁸ Abramson, ‘On Bernie Sanders’.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid..

¹⁶⁰ Abramson, ‘Listen Up, Progressives’.

¹⁶¹ Abramson, ‘Ten Basic Principles’.

¹⁶² Abramson, ‘Listen Up, Progressives’.

could potentially change their actions, if they chose to embrace it.¹⁶³ Abramson also writes that his strategies when writing poetry are suggestive of the process of striving to create new narratives in our current world. Many people feel, he says, as if they are ‘awash in too much data,’ bombarded by information and media, but we nonetheless strive to organize that data for ourselves, and to construct new narratives that can work for us.¹⁶⁴ Likewise, when Abramson, in his poems, remixes ‘a pop star’s song catalog, or a celebrity’s chapbook of poems,’¹⁶⁵ he claims that he is responding to our society’s flood of data, with ‘everything culturally in pieces,’ and is reconstructing something new that is meaningful to him.

Finally and separately, Freinacht also contends that a metamodernist grand narrative would give voice to a plurality of diverse perspectives, consider their challenges and alternatives, and make revisions accordingly. He imagines a grand narrative, the end and goal of which is a world that is ‘ecologically sustainable’ which is ‘without poverty and social insecurity’¹⁶⁶ and in which everyone is ‘secure at the deepest psychological level . . . a byproduct of which is a sense of meaning in life and lasting happiness.’¹⁶⁷ He also claims that this ideal world would be a listening society in which individuals would ‘not judge people for their opinions’¹⁶⁸ and everyone would ‘listen more than we speak’ and ‘openly discuss both the advantages and disadvantages of a certain argument or line of action.’¹⁶⁹ Freinacht agrees with the postmodernist, who asks: ‘Shouldn’t *all* perspectives be included and get a voice?’¹⁷⁰

Suppose that the great goal and end described by a metamodernist grand narrative is a listening society like this. Then we could not think that people contribute to the historical progress described by a metamodernist grand narrative unless they also help to create a world in which everyone’s voice is considered equal. Evaluating people according to this metamodernist narrative would mean, in part, evaluating the extent to which they: encourage the development of alternative, diverse narratives and

¹⁶³ Abramson, ‘On Bernie Sanders’.

¹⁶⁴ Abramson, ‘Listen Up, Progressives’.

¹⁶⁵ Abramson, ‘Metamodernism: The Basics’. Also see, for example, his book of poems *Metamoderna* in which several of his poems remix Taylor Swift’s lyrics, and another juxtaposes several texts from *Wikipedia* and *Spark Notes*: Seth Abramson, *Metamericana*, Buffalo, BlazeVOX [books], 2015.

¹⁶⁶ Freinacht, *The Listening Society*, p. 69.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 81; also see pp. 4 & 82.

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 356.

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 113

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 232. Also see: Brent Cooper, ‘Book Review of “The Listening Society: A Metamodern Guide to Politics”’, *Medium.com*, September 15, 2017, <https://medium.com/the-abs-tract-organization/the-listening-society-ed10f559f824>

perspectives; engage in real discourse with those with different approaches, recognizing their own narratives' blind spots and deficiencies in response; and revise their own narratives and perspectives, improving them in response to this discourse. Further, those who create and live according to alternative, diverse narratives and perspectives would contribute to the progress defined by a metamodernist grand narrative just as well as those who live according to the metamodernist narrative, itself. Thus, perhaps those who experience metamodernism can embrace the sort of utopia and progress Seyla Benhabib has encouraged, one 'not of appeasement and rest, but of constant integration and differentiation', in which each individual 'can appreciate otherness without dissolving in it' and 'can respect heterogeneity without being overwhelmed by it'.¹⁷¹

IV. CONCLUSION: GLOBAL ETHICS

In order to better reflect on ethics and moral philosophy in a time of metamodernism, it is key to treat metamodernism as a structure of feeling, as Vermeulen and van den Akker do. If these two theorists are correct, then while metamodernism is neither a philosophy nor a movement, it is nonetheless true that many people who now experience the metamodern structure of feeling also belong to movements and embrace philosophies of life and moral theories. This is not to say, of course, that everyone who experiences the metamodern structure of feeling belongs to the same movements or has the same philosophy. Just as different people who have experienced a modernist structure of feeling have held thousands of very different philosophical perspectives, so too those who experience metamodernism could also believe thousands of different theories. But what is certain is that, just like those who experienced modernism were *inclined* to different sorts of philosophical perspectives from those who experienced postmodernism, so too those who experience metamodernism are now *inclined* to different sorts of perspectives, as well. If Vermeulen and van den Akker are correct, that metamodernism has become the new cultural dominant, it would follow that – quite possibly but not certainly – new and in some ways very different philosophical perspectives could now become popular.

If Vermeulen and van den Akker are correct, then many people no longer share the postmodernist's incredulity toward grand narratives. But likewise, many people also do not feel that narratives are certain and inevitably true like many modernists did; rather, people experience what Vermeulen and van den Akker call an 'informed naivety' about them. Perhaps those who experience the metamodern structure of

¹⁷¹ Seyla Benhabib, 'Critical Theory and Postmodernism: On the Interplay of Ethics, Aesthetics, and Utopia in Critical Theory', *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 11, 1990, p. 1448.

feeling are thus *better able* to embrace the sort of polyphonic, environmentalist grand narrative which Gare describes, and which is neither modern nor postmodern.

Certainly, people who experience metamodernism could and do embrace a wide variety of narratives ('as if' they were true), some of which are neither polyphonic nor friendly to the environment at all. I do not mean to imply that experiencing the metamodern structure of feeling guarantees that anyone will accept the kind of narratives Gare describes, or even increases the likelihood. But nonetheless, if Vermeulen and van den Akker are correct about the status of metamodernism in current society, then it might also be true that the polyphonic grand narrative Gare describes is now more open, as a genuine possibility for us, collectively, than it was when humans experienced older structures of feeling. After all, modernists were characteristically inclined to accept monologic, unchanging narratives, while Gare's narrative is polyphonic and changing, and postmodernists were characteristically incredulous to all grand narratives.

Suppose the theorists I have discussed in this paper are correct. Then it is possible for us, feeling about and approaching grand narratives as we do with a metamodern structure of feeling, to embrace a polyphonic, metamodernist, environmentalist grand narrative. Further, if we embrace a narrative like this, we would be far better able to collaborate, across the world, to effectively address a plethora of global crises and political issues. Additionally, we morally *ought* to do that which enables us to effectively address these crises, provided the costs and disadvantages are not too great. Finally, we can read many theorists to commonly agree that the costs of adopting such a narrative are not too high.

So, here, I arrive at a normative, ethical conclusion, framed conditionally. If the theorists I have discussed in this paper are correct, then we ought to embrace a polyphonic, metamodernist, environmentalist grand narrative. That is, we ought to recognize the grand narratives our metamodern structure of feeling opens up to us, and we ought to adopt those narratives that would best guide us toward collectively improving our world. And perhaps, experiencing a metamodern structure of feeling that oscillates between modernism and postmodernism, we might actually, in the real world, do as we ought.

Turner claims that metamodernism is not a manifesto but writes: 'I couldn't resist the temptation to imagine it as if it were'.¹⁷² He wrote a 2011 art-piece, the 'Metamodernist Manifesto', which he claims is both ironic and preposterous yet also

¹⁷² Turner, 'Metamodernism: A Brief'.

sincere and hopeful. It concludes: “We must go forth and oscillate!”¹⁷³

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¹⁷³ Turner, ‘Metamodernist /// Manifesto’.

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