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Negative Philosophy

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Research Proposal

The idea that the cynicism of mankind shown in *The Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi plays in very well with the skepticism described by *The Thing Itself* by Adam Roberts incredibly well, showing that humans have a tendency to create their own personally beneficial reality that is likely to not be entirely real, and by extension, no universal reality exists.

Similarly to what is stated above, it is of utmost importance to make sure that people are one the same page when talking about things such as perspectives and ideals. Cynicism is the idea that humans are inherently selfish, motivated through greed, and typically distrust others leading to an overall negative view of the world and others that inhabit it. Meanwhile skepticism is the thought process of questioning the possibility or validity of knowledge or facts. This often leads to a split in those who are skeptics because the different categorizations they can fall into, those that deny any possibility of knowledge and those that withhold assumptions due to lack of evidence. The ideas and meanings of cynicism and skepticism are explained as such. “Skepticism is about asking questions, being dubious, being wary, not being gullible. Cynicism is about already having the answers — or thinking you do. The skeptic says ‘I don’t think that’s true. I’m going to check it out.’ The cynic says, ‘I know that’s not true. It couldn’t be.’” (Cappalla, Jamieson). Those who fall more into cynicism seem to have the tendency to believe only they could be correct due to the selfish ideologies they subscribe to. A skeptic, in a relatively normal and safe environment, will usually focus all of its energy onto one topic until proven one way or the other, or inevitably driving into insanity.

This can go many ways, like wrapping back into the thesis about how these two types of people will often be in similar headspaces. They will tend back to the ideas in their head, whether trying to understand something new like a skeptic would, or thinking they already know what needs to be done like a cynic. However, *The Water Knife* exemplifies the selfishness aspect of cynicism. This selfishness is used as the reasoning behind many acts throughout the story

In order to make a claim as such, it is important to know the context in which this applies. The common saying of “Perspective is everything” is incredibly relevant, especially as populations continue to disagree. Someone who has never truly starved is likely not going to fully understand the lengths of which another is willing to go through in order to end that struggle. This is shown in *The Water Knife* excellently through the use of cynicism and how the basic human reliance on water demonstrates that many people who are struggling are only capable of having their own self interest as a priority. This is shown clearly through Maria after shooting Angel. “She thought maybe she was supposed to feel worse that this woman was suffering, but she didn’t, and it made her wonder about herself. She wondered if something was broken inside her now, with all the things she’d seen and done, but in the end she couldn’t make herself care about that, either. All she could think about was that she was going to cross the river, and she’d see the fountains in Las Vegas where anyone could dip a cup in” (Bacigalupi). Similarly, those who are more fortunate often tend to continue their ways of greed to further their advantages. A great example of this is shown at the end of the story as Maria, Lucy, Angel, and the Water Knife talked. “Live by the gun, die by the gun, right, mijo? You make a living cutting people’s water, at some point, the scales got to balance you out. Symmetry. Clear symmetry. Some people had to bleed so other people could drink. Simple as that. It was just his turn.” (Bacigalupi). It feels as though both of these passages strongly support the proposed thesis that people will convince themselves that their way of life is the proper way. When someone’s back is against the wall, it can often seem as though there is only one way out.

The idea of altruism, that there is no such deed that is truly selfless also plays into this thesis quite well. There is still more research and evidence to collect surrounding this topic, however it seems to be a rather prominent talking point between ethics and philosophy. It is a common justification for actions to say that the motivation was to help others. Think of something like those who volunteer at soup kitchens for example, the reasoning for committing time towards these things is usually because it makes the volunteers feel good about helping those in need, or “making a difference”. While it is important to note that these acts are almost entirely beneficial for all parties involved, the motivation is what is arguable. A major caveat to those who deny the existence of altruism is the idea that people do things based on feelings and emotion rather than solely based on exterior motives. Interior motives are a very tricky thing to quantify since they do not have tangible value, which can lead those who are not motivated in similar ways to believe that it does not necessarily exist. This strengthens the argument that there is no truly universal reality as everyone sees this in a different way. This can be extended to anything, such as things like washing the dishes, politics, and life goals. For anyone who has lived with roommates, it is almost guaranteed that they have had an argument over when to wash the dishes, where someone sees it best to do them directly after using them and the other simply puts them in the sink until they need to be used next time. While one is not necessarily wrong, it remains true to both sides that their procedure is the *only* proper way to do things. Similarly in politics, some believe that democracy and capitalism is the only viable option while others wholeheartedly believe there is another possible system such as socialism or dare I say communism (I’m looking at you Marx). It is completely possible that in another person’s reality, things operate differently despite playing by the same general rules. This is also not to say that not having an ultimate reality is a bad thing either, as it allows humans to be diverse and challenge other ideas. What makes sense to someone may not necessarily make sense to another person of a different perspective or reality.

This idea can largely be connected to the ideas of Karl Marx’s utopian socialist vision. Marx intentionally omits any exact outline of how his utopian society functions, as he believes that it should be up to each person to function in the ways that they see fit. There is a lot more depth to go into here but the overlying theme is that Marx believes that people should see the fruits of their labor, but also that everyone should define what their own work should be. Each different person would have their own definition of how their average day breaks down, further pushing the idea of not having a global reality. This topic can connect back to the thesis in more ways, but ultimately requires a bulk of the research for this writing which has not been fully completed yet. In the working bibliography is a site by Stanford about all of Marx’s ideas and works that will further add to this conversation.

More ideas for the essay are surrounding the skepticism shown in *The Thing Itself* by Adam Roberts. These will connect back to the thesis by furthering the argument that everything that “exists” could also not exist and just be a figment of our imagination, or our own personal reality. Overall it feels as though this is headed in a good direction, though it feels broad as many different sub ideas come together. If there is any recommendation for that it would be greatly appreciated.

Working Bibliography

Bacigalupi, Paolo. *The Water Knife*. Little Brown, 2016. -- used above

Cappella, Joseph N., and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *Spiral of Cynicism: the Press and the Public Good*. Oxford University Press, 2010. -- used above.

Wolff, Jonathan, and David Leopold. “Karl Marx.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 21 Dec. 2020, plato.stanford.edu/entries/marx/#UtopSoci.