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Moral Compass: A philosophical Reading of *Vicious* by V.E Schwab

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Literature and Civilisations

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this submission entitled “Moral Compass: A philosophical Reading of *Vicious* by V.E Schwab” is my work and that, it contains no unreferenced material previously published or written by another person nor material which has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution. I affirm that all references and sources that helped in preparing this thesis have been acknowledged.

Date: 07/05/2023

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my beloved brother Abdelmadjid whose faith in me made me all I am and more today.

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Abstract

Inside the academic halls where everyone is encouraged to chase their ambitions, there has always been a topic that some considered an obstacle while others embrace it as part of the process, which is morality. This research aims to study morality within an academic setting in V.E Schwab's novel *Vicious* and tries to sort out what defines the characters' moral compass relying on Lawrence Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory and Bernard Rollin's Frankenstein's Syndrome Theory. Therefore, this study is conducted to reveal the main characters' moral development and discuss what directly influenced their moral reasoning, and consequently, their moral compass.

Keywords: Moral Compass, Moral Development Theory, Frankenstein's Syndrome Theory, Dark Academia, science.

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List of Abbreviations

GR: The Golden Rule

DCT: The Devine Command Theory

EO: ExtraOrdinary

NDE: Near Death Experience

General Introduction

Inside the halls of academia, academists inevitably find themselves facing situations that challenge their moral compass and bring their conception of morality into question. Some manage to remain loyal to what defines their personal moral rules while others betray themselves and let all their guards down in front of the right temptations that lure them in, promising to fulfill their wildest academic aspirations.

Morality as it is has been a bewildering concept for philosophers over the history. They have been trying to conceptualize it through different perspectives, Plato (402 BCE), Aristotle (340 BCE), Kant (1785), or Moore (1903) and many more scholars thought of morality from different perspectives, and argued about what makes an action intrinsically right or wrong. This conversation brought other questions and theories to the table that investigated the individuals' moral development, and whether their motives could justify the way they go about achieving their objectives, and this issue was discussed in so many different literary texts.

V.E Schwab's novel *Vicious* (2013) attempts to reveal the outcome of rampant ambition when it intermingles with self-interest, and its direct impact on one's moral compass. Indeed, the novel's characters strive to stand out in an academic area, but the moment a wicked sense of selfishness washes over their motives, the line between right and wrong blurs.

Moreover, the author describes the characters' moral journey, and how their sense of morality constantly changes because of their motives. She uses *Vicious* to portray the impact that one's egocentric view of the world has on their environment. Additionally, Schwab discusses villainy and heroism in a different light in which she brings the nuances of both to give a more realistic view of human nature.

This research aims to establish a study of the protagonists' moral development and the reasoning behind their actions to sort out the factors that mainly directed their moral compass. Hence, the present work aims to figure out what is morality according to the moralists' theories that have been guiding humankind across history. It also seeks to unravel the possible reasons that affect one's moral choices.

In this regard, the main research question attempts to discover what does define one's moral compass?

The following research questions are presented to get answers to the research problem mentioned above:

- How can we decide what is/is not morally accepted?
- Is there a pattern for human beings' moral development?
- Do morals hinder human nature from development?

In this respect, the following research hypotheses are formed based on the above research questions:

1. Contemporary moral theories may offer a strong perception of what morality should truly stand upon in society.
2. Moral Development Theory can reveal the factors that direct people's moral compass at different points in their life.
3. Frankenstein's Syndrome Theory might help to answer whether it is acceptable to set morals aside while conducting human development experiments or not.

Lawrence Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory and Bernard E. Rollin's Frankenstein's Syndrome Theory have been used to answer the research questions and prove the accuracy of the research hypotheses above. Books, journals, documents, dissertations, and websites have been used to collect data on the works of scholars and theorists in the field of morality.

This research work is divided into three chapters. The first chapter gives a background that tracks the different approaches and theories that philosophers developed about the conception of morality across history. The second chapter opens up with a detailed explanation of the moral compass, then shifts into the theoretical foundation of this research that includes Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory and Rollin's Frankenstein's Syndrome Theory, and it concludes with a detailed introduction to the literary genre of the novel *Dark Academia*. Finally, the third chapter analyses the plot and the characters of *Vicious* using Moral Development Theory and Frankenstein's Syndrome Theory to bring to light what directed the moral compass of the characters and influenced their moral reasoning.

Chapter One: An Introduction Into Morality

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1.1.Introduction

One's moral compass or the inner ability to distinguish between right and wrong has been a bewildering subject for philosophers for ages. As a result, they worked diligently to build theories and approaches in an attempt to understand what morality, to a certain extent, is about.

The chapter opens with a brief background of how the concept of morals started and developed across history. Next, it discusses the relationship between religion and morality and then continues with exploring normative ethics, including Virtue ethics, Contractualism, Utilitarianism and Rule Utilitarianism, along with Kantian and Feminist ethics. Finally, it concludes with Metaethics that cover Naturalism, Intuitionism, and Non-cognitivism.

1.2. Morality Background

Morality is a sensation that creeps into one and perplexes him/her. It halts them from complying with whatever a moment of weakness that is led by their desires or lack of reason, dictates them to do. It shakes one awake before s/he sleepwalks into a labyrinth where s/he would no longer be able to recognize him/herself.

Morals are a set of principles that rule human beings' behaviors, not only toward the other individuals with whom they live within the same society but also toward themselves (Frankena, 1980). That could come off as surprising at first because one could be familiar only with his/her obligation to be moral toward other people by not doing them harm or causing them any inconvenience by his/her actions. However, being moral and just toward oneself is also part of being moral as one has an obligation to him/herself to respect it, take care of it, and maintain its dignity (Muñoz, 2022). One should not do anything that would humiliate or inflict pain on him/her because the primal responsibility one has is to look out after him/herself to be in a state that allows him/her to judge their actions with others through a healthy lens. Then, when thinking of one's duty toward others, it is manifested through adhering to the public system that sets the shared common sense of what is right or wrong in society. In other words, "*the principles of morality are other-regarding*" (Harper, 2009, p.1066).

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Etymologically, the term moral comes from the Latin word: *mos*, which primarily translates to *customs*. However, the meaning varies between its singular and plural forms as *mos* refers to a system of traditions and habits, while *mores* refer to how one's internal motivation and character align with external actions, even the ones compelled by law (Walker & Lovat, 2016).

Greek and Latin writers used the term *Morality* in its prescriptive meaning, which resulted in it being perceived as *Applied Ethics* since morality is a realistic appliance of the theoretical concept of ethics. Hence, the difference between the two terms *Ethics* and *Morals* was eventually limited to merely a semantic difference (Walker & Lovat, 2016).

1.2.1. The Golden Rule

According to Gensler (2013) when tracing how morals and ethics have been progressing throughout history, the earliest recorded moral principle would be the *Golden Rule* that reads *Treat others as you want to be treated*.

Most religions and cultures sanctioned The Golden Rule (GR) as a global standard of ethics from the Abrahamic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the Non-Abrahamic religions Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Even Atheists adhere to the same notion when discussing the heart of morality, which to some extent made the GR a uniting rule between believers, of all religions, and non-believers.

Although the wording kept changing throughout time, at its core, the Golden Rule kept promoting the concept of people putting themselves in others' shoes before acting, imagining themselves in their situation, and calculating the further consequences of their actions on others around them. It bids them to disassociate from their ego-centric view of the world and attempt to see it through the eyes of the people standing in front of them.

1.2.2. The Silver Rule

Swidler (2019) dived into the negative articulation of the two clauses of the GR, the *Silver Rule* that says *Do not do to others what you do not wish others to do to you*. He mentioned that the notion of this rule was also worded differently by different figures, at various timeframes, and in several areas of the world, such as Persia by

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Zarathustra, Thales in Greece, and the famous Confucius in China, who made it the golden rule of what is called today Confucianism. He named it *shu* 恕, which translates into *reciprocity*.

However, as Besser-Jones & Slote (2015) explained, Confucius put other requirements to be an *ideal person* (*junzi* 君子) that included adapting other *Confucian* concepts that he regarded as ethical virtues next to reciprocity (*shu* 恕). A *junzi* or an ideal person has to be honest (*xin* 信) and hardworking (*Zhong* 忠), curious about learning (*Xue* 學) and values knowledge (*zhi* 知), acts properly (*yi* 義) and acts according to the ritual proprieties (*li* 禮). Essentially, he has the highest sense of humaneness (*ren* 仁).

1.2.3. The Platinum Rule

Many contemporary philosophers criticized the Golden Rule as they alleged it is built on a self-centred concept that assumes everyone wants to be treated the same way one would want himself to be treated. This assumption could easily be reckless as not everyone shares the same likes and dislikes or comes from the same background. Subsequently, the American sociologist Bennett, M.J. (1979) introduced a new concept he named the *Platinum Rule* that reads “*Do unto others as they themselves would have done unto them*” (p. 213). Bennett suggested that instead of adopting a notion that implies a universal similarity, one must learn how to be empathetic and treat people in the way they, themselves, want to be treated.

Moreover, the Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper explained that the human species naturally would not reach the absolute truth of what is right and wrong. However, they still can progress and discover new aspects of what once seemed unarguably right. In relation to the Golden Rule, he agreed that it could be a good standard only if it is redefined as “doing unto others, wherever possible, as they want to be done by” (1994, p. 501).

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1.3. Between Ethics and Religion

Although the two terms *Ethics* and *Morals* are used interchangeably in many settings, it is important to note that they are intrinsically different. Both ethics and morals deal with what is right and wrong, however, ethics refer to a set of codes that could be provided by an external source to maintain order in a professional setting and conduct how one should behave. Meanwhile, morals refer to a set of *personal* principles that rules one's individual life and guide him/her to distinguish between right and wrong. Nonetheless, in this work, the two terms will be used interchangeably.

Throughout history, philosophers and ethicists have been trying to find the possible relationship between religion and morality. It is still an unanswered question to many, as it will be sort out next, whether religion and God could be the origin of morality and whether the rules and laws that individuals derive from their religions and holy books are the salvation and the key to living a good life.

1.3.1 Devine Command Theory

Resorting to religion, or God, to solve one's moral dilemmas is one of the oldest options that people have adopted over history because it seems to be more settling to resort to a higher and wiser power to judge one's actions without any subjectivity. Additionally, the holy books, Quran, The Bible, and the Torah played out the role of a manual guideline for theists to recognize their ethical duties without quarrelling about this and that. In other words, they are bending to unquestionable commandments because God issued them, hence the name of the theory. The Devine Command Theory suggests that the origin of morality is purely God's commandments. It has been one of the most influential ethical theories so far, mainly for its simplicity as people do not need to be under the scrutiny of anyone but God (Morgan, 2020).

According to Morgan (2020), this theory is still flawed when thinking of it in a different light. Plato in his dialogue *Euthyphro* revisited one of the dialogues that took part in Athens between his teacher, Socrates and a man named Euthyphro as the two were sitting in front of a courthouse waiting for their trials. Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens as he was allegedly misportraying the gods, while Euthyphro was prosecuting his father for a murder. Euthyphro completely believed

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that his choice was morally right in the eyes of God, but Socrates did not seem to agree and threw a sceptical thought that remains, to this day, one of the most sophisticated moral dilemmas, *the Euthyphro dilemma*.

Socrates wondered whether action X is allowed only because God approved it or God approved action X because it is morally right. These two options may come off as similar at first, but they are far from being that. If one chooses the first option, it means that s/he accepts that God alone decides what is wrong or right regardless of the action's nature and its consequences, whether positive or negative, which suggests that God solely is the one who defines what the concept of goodness is. However, other thinkers argued that if one is living according to God's commands without further questioning the reason or the wisdom behind them, then this implies that s/he is admitting God's commands to be arbitrary and can be changed randomly as God sees fit. For instance, if God forbids adultery, then it is forbidden because God says so. However, it also could become allowed if God decides so, regardless of how adultery itself is a violation of fidelity, and it would not make sense to commit it in the first place. Others thought that the mere fact that people consider the option of adultery being allowed wrong is itself a sign that morality is independent of God.

On the other hand, when choosing the second option, one is admitting that God disapproved of a certain act because it is wrong according to another principle that God is deriving these commands from, which, again, brings forth the notion of morality's independence from God.

1.3.2. Natural Law Theory

The Devine Command Theory (DCT) is still, until today, embraced by so many thinkers all around the world regardless of its flaws. However, many theists have directed their attention toward a different approach to finding the link between morality and God. They adopted the Natural Law Theory of Morality.

Morgan (2020) stated that the Italian theologian St. Thomas Aquinas is most associated with this theory as his take on it is the most influential and relevant until this day. The concept of this theory agreed with DCT's idea that God issues commands, yet these commands are not worded explicitly but ingrained into nature. One should contemplate nature around him/her to understand the mechanism and

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purpose of the things God created, then should use his/her logic to derive the moral way to interact with the world and the individuals around him/her, and grasp his/her ethical duties.

What made this theory stronger than the DCT was the fact that people are to figure out what is moral or not by using nothing but logic and reason. However, this theory faced criticism, especially from atheists because claiming that there is a talented designer behind this universe, who is good and makes nothing but *good* would not convince them as they do not even believe God exists in the first place. While other thinkers stood against this theory and argued that if these laws exist in nature then why would human beings even go back to God to recognize what is moral or not?

Religion and morality have been going hand in hand for many theologians throughout history and many, to this present day, embrace the notion that claims a faithful life equals a moral life along with the fear of the afterlife punishment that forces them to do nothing but good. However, many philosophers believed that morality stands upon the notion of doing the *right thing* out of the *right intention* for the *right reason* and not because one is hoping to gain something out of it. Otherwise, it is not considered a genuine moral action.

1.4. Normative Ethics

Ethicists have been trying to recognize what kind of moral rules would serve humanity best and eventually build a moral society. Normative ethics is a branch that involves all those moral theories that present specific rules, traits, and actions to be followed to build the closest thing to an ethical society that human beings could peacefully live in.

1.4.1. Virtue Ethics

Confucius was not the last person who constructed an ethical system based on virtue because when looking back at how the philosophical approach to morality started, one would find the Greek pioneers of moral philosophy, Socrates and his pupils, Plato and Aristotle too have built their ethical standpoint on virtue.

Socrates believed that knowledge is a virtue because if you know something is good, you will do it. Being knowledgeable would make one rational, and as a result,

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s/he will be able to distinguish the right thing to do. Meanwhile, he described the people who opt to do bad things as ignorants who are just in a dark place mentally where they cannot distinguish the good from the bad yet (for more check Pecorino, 2001).

Additionally, Socrates stated that virtue could not be taught to others while knowledge could be. However, his students, Plato and Aristotle, disagreed with him. They believed that virtue could be acquired and learnt from other exemplars (Plato, 402 B.C.E/2004).

On his part, Plato agreed that being virtuous is enough for people to lead a happy life and attain *Eudaimonia*, which is often translated to *Human flourishing* or *Living well and doing well* (Plato, 1943). While Aristotle believed that being virtuous is not enough to reach true happiness. Instead, he invited people to put in an effort and try to be a better version of themselves to reach genuine happiness (350 B.C.E/2009).

Aristotle explained that virtue is set between two vices; one is the extreme of *excess* and the second is the extreme of *deficiency*. The mid-point between these two is called *the doctrine of the mean*. He also classified virtues into two kinds, moral virtues and intellectual virtues.

Moral virtues are character traits; Aristotle listed them as follows: courage, temperance, generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, pride, patience, honesty, wittiness, friendliness, modesty and righteous indignation. These traits are controlled by the irrational part of the soul, so to tame them one has to resort to rationality, logic, and reason. Aristotle also insisted that they cannot be taught, but instead, they are unconsciously developed during childhood and influenced by one's familial environment and habits.

Intellectual virtues are abilities, and since they are controlled by the rational part of the soul, they reflect one's mastery of logic and reason. In this vein, Aristotle divided the intellectual virtues into two additional types. *Theoria* is one's ability to contemplate the nature of the world, and it is the closest to one's understanding of scientific laws. The second type he calls *Phronesis* or practical wisdom. This type can only be learnt through experiences, observing moral exemplars and emulating them. Throughout time, their virtuous traits will be ingrained in one's character, and one

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will be able to choose the virtuous thing to do naturally. In short, to be virtuous for Aristotle “is to possess the disposition to act virtuously, and the *practical* wisdom to know how and when to do so” (Malik, 2014, p. 65).

1.4.2. Contractualism

Human beings are naturally egoist species, even if unintentionally, and philosophers have been trying to settle on the answer to the question of whether any of the actions one does are not egoistic in any way, and if not, then what would be the salvation of a society where everyone is chasing nothing, but their purpose?

1.4.2.1 Psychological Egoism

Kao (2020) stated that Psychological egoists argued that there is no such thing as altruism. They believed that everything one does is to serve his/her agenda, and even when an action on the surface seems heroic and selfless, it still would provide a benefit, eventually, whether concrete or abstract, even if one is not aware of it.

This theory suggested that human beings could never be purely moral because morality, in the grand scheme of things, demands individuals to do things for other people and put their interests before themselves sometimes. But if the individual is well aware of the fact that by the end of this action, s/he will be rewarded in one way or another, it cancels the moralistic dimension of the action, instead, it will become utterly selfish and narcissistic.

Although the psychological egoists called this theory a *non-falsifiable* theory, many refused this view because they believed that, regardless of one’s self-awareness degree, there would always be a possibility that one would not be able to recognize his/her true motives, and could possibly be doing something purely for the sake of others.

1.4.2.2. Ethical Egoism

In the same vein, other philosophers saw that selfishness and egoism could be one of the many aspects of the mystery that human beings are still trying to solve, morality. According to Kao (2020) Ethical egoism claimed that one should primarily seek his/her self-interest because, in fact, this is what morality is. This theory did, of

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course, allow individuals to look out for other people and help them. However, one ought to do so only to an extent to which s/he will be benefited too.

However, this theory, if anything, did throw people into endless loops of scepticism and mistrust. Nobody would be able to confide in another because they all know that, at their core, they are egoistic and would do anything to serve their interests. This brings forth the prisoner dilemma; two prisoners are put for interrogation in two separate rooms and offered either to testify against the other and get released or to remain silent and face a lesser charge. However, if both betray each other, they will be jailed for 20 years. Normally, the prisoners would trust each other and cooperate for mutual benefit, but because they both know that they are self-interested and would blindly do whatever serves them in the first place, they might doom each other for 20 years. This dilemma is one way to demonstrate why human beings shall subscribe to a larger system that controls their actions and ensure they will not break the rules and betray or cheat on each other when the consequences would not bring them harm personally, and that is how the social contract concept emerged.

1.4.2.3. The Social Contract

Thomas Hobbes (1651/1996) believed that human beings are self-interested and rational creatures that could be living in harmony and peace if they give up some of their natural freedom and agree upon a set of social conventions to form a social contract that contributes to society's best. Hobbes insisted that if everyone is left to their whims, society will turn into a hellish place because everyone will be chasing their own interests regardless of the harm their actions would inflict upon others, and as everyone will be doing this, it will rob everyone else of their own security. In other words, they will be trading their security for freedom in a place that will soon turn into a madhouse. This will make individuals realize that living in a society together would be way more amicable and beneficial for their interests if they all just cooperate instead of living in what Hobbes described as a *state of war of all against all*.

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1.4.3. Utilitarianism

A different ethical approach emerged that did not put focus on the action itself to label it as morally right or not, but on its result as the actions are generally defined by what they bring to the table, be it good or bad.

Utilitarianism or Act Utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism because its concept rests on the idea that the consequences of one's actions solely decide whether they are morally right or wrong (Eggleston & Miller, 2014). For consequentialists, actions are deemed morally right or wrong according to their outcome, if it is positive, it is moral, but if it is negative, it is immoral. In like manner, for a utilitarian, actions are considered to be right only if their outcome will be in favour of the majority, but if it ends up harming most people, it is considered wrong.

One of the most important figures in developing the utilitarianism theory is the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham. He is associated with act utilitarianism, in which he argued that happiness equals pleasure and the amount of pleasure one's actions produce judges whether these actions are right or wrong. Bentham thought people should evaluate all the options in front of them and go with the most utilitarian one, which would be the action that produces the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. According to him, pleasures cannot inflict pain although he agreed that the degree of enjoyment varies from one pleasure to another, he affirmed that at their core, they are all equal (DeMarco, n.d).

Bentham also formulated a *calculus of utility* or *felicific calculus* in which one could calculate the pleasures and pains of all their actions after evaluating certain characteristics, and then they are to go with the action that eventually will induce the most pleasure. The characteristics are as follows:

The Duration: a long-term pleasure is better than a short one because it produces more pleasure. For example, the pleasure one would derive from the academic success that will be favoring them for the rest of their life even after leaving the halls of the academic sphere.

Propinquity: a pleasure that can be experienced as soon as possible is better than a delayed one. For instance, if one is yearning to travel, s/he will be happier and in a better mental state if s/he does it soon.

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Fruitfulness: a fruitful pleasure that is an opening gate to other pleasures is better than a dead-end one as people who choose to work in a field they have passion for will make them happier and more creative, which will eventually make them more successful.

Intensity: Intense pleasure is better than a boring one, and this one depends on the individual. For example, if one enjoys skating, which is a pretty adrenaline-rushing hobby, one obviously cannot feel the same happiness and excitement when reading a book.

Certainty: a pleasure that one knows will certainly have great consequences is better than an uncertain one. For instance, if one chooses to study a branch that s/he knows will master in the long term, s/he will be happier than when choosing another branch that might not suit his/her skills.

Purity: a pure pleasure that does not inflict pain in the process is better than one that somewhat includes pain. For example, the pleasure that people with mental illnesses find in cutting themselves is harmful, they better pour their negative emotions in a much healthier way.

1.4.4. Criticism to Utilitarianism

Act utilitarianism received a lot of criticism against its hedonistic approach. Philosophers argued that the actions that lead to the maximization of social utility could contradict common-sense morality. So as a reaction to these critics, the economist Harrod (1936) suggested a revised form of utilitarianism that the American philosopher Brandt (1959) later named *Rule Utilitarianism*.

Harrod proposed that an action is morally right only if it meets the correct moral rules that yield the greatest amount of pleasure in the long term. The goal should be achieving the greatest social utility for the greatest amount of people in the long term by following the correct moral rules. For example, one should respect the laws on the road while driving even if s/he is not under the supervision of any authorities. S/he will be following the correct moral rules and also save everyone else on the road the trouble of being a reckless driver, which might cause a tragedy.

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1.4.5. Kantian Deontology

Kant, like Bentham, also was convinced that people derive their morality from logic and reason. Only he had a totally different take than the one Bentham pursued as he disagreed with him that consequences are what defined one's morality solely. He emphasized the importance of intentions to evaluate our actions (Misselbrook, 2013).

Kant insisted that human beings' possession of rationality allows them to follow universal duties toward each other. The substance of these duties is acknowledging and respecting other's humanity, regarding all humans equivalently and maintaining their dignity. In the same vein, he argued that one's morality comes from the duties that are most and foremost, based on deontological ethics. Furthermore, Kant (1785 as cited in Kranak, 2020) presented two types of imperatives that he called the *hypothetical* and *categorical* imperative.

A hypothetical imperative is a conditional command that stands upon one's desires or needs. It reads *If you want/need X, then you must do Y*. A hypothetical imperative only applies if the person, himself, is fully willing to want or need that particular result. However, to Kant, morality was not defined via hypothetical imperative but by the categorical imperative, which is an absolute command that one must abide by regardless of one's desires, needs, or goals (Kranak, 2020).

Kant believed categorical imperative is better understood through several different formulations. The first formulation and the most famous states that one could do something only if s/he is willing it accept it becoming a universal law (Kant, 1785/1998). Kranak (2020) explained that Kant meant one is only allowed to do an act if he wills that maxim, whether it is a personal or general principle, to be universalized and everyone is equally allowed to do it as no one should be an exception in the eyes of morality. But if the action cannot be universalized, then it is immoral. Kant in this formulation was not aiming to build a utopia, but he was noting that one's actions could end up contradicting themselves. For example, if one accepts universalizing stealing, the concept of stealing itself will lose its meaning because everyone will be stealing from everyone else and nobody will own anything to begin with to be stolen from them. The action will become meaningless.

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The second formulation states that one should act only in a way that treats the other party as an end itself and not a mean (Kant, 1785/1998) Kant's ethics stands against exploiting people selfishly. However, they still can benefit from each others' expertise in different areas as long as they simultaneously acknowledge each other's human value (Kranak, 2020).

The third formulation states that one should only act in a way that achieves living in a *kingdom of ends* (Kant, 1785/1998) Kranak defined the notion of a *Kingdom of ends* as a society that derives its morality from reason and abides by the same rules in which others' humanity is respected, that to Kant is a moral society (2020).

1.4.6. Feminist Ethics

One of the weaknesses of the dominant traditional moral theories was leaving the women's voices out of their approaches. These theories were more considerate of the male entity in society with almost no regard to what women were enduring at that time (Walker, 1992).

These theories also claimed that the household is a private sphere in which their rules do not necessarily apply. As a result, women had to experience the ugliest forms of oppression and abuse that left them under the mercy of their houses' patriarchal system for so long (Held, 2006).

By 1970, more articles and journals started tackling sexism and feminism, which gave women the opportunity to rise and start sharing their perspectives more systematically and made new ethical theories based on their experience and what they believed the traditional moral theories lacked (Norlock, 2019).

1.4.6.1 Existentialist Ethics

In her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947/1948) Simone De Beauvoir attempted to define what a moral system must stand on. She claimed that the individual's freedom will guarantee him/her the ability to take the right choices. Morality for Beauvoir could not be limited to a universal set of codes that are expected to be adhered to. In her opinion, ethics must aim to acknowledge one's and others' freedom and to revolt against whatever and whoever tries to rob people of it because no one would bother questioning what is right or wrong if they are under oppression. They

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are well aware their life course will not be affected either way as they are not the ones leading it.

In the same respect, she explained that the oppressor usually treats the oppressed as a thing to rob them of their capacity to realize that they, in fact, have freedom, which leads to the oppressed regarding her/himself the same way and trapping him/her in a comfortable cage where s/he does not have to choose for her/himself simply because s/he bends his/her head to the idea of being an object and believes s/he cannot afford the capacity of actively taking up the responsibility of her/his own life, which s/he finds strangely comforting in a way. So she suggested for one to be moral, one must assume his/her freedom and embrace the ambiguity and overall confusion that accompanies his/her existence instead of trying to flee it (Overthink Podcast, 2022).

Once one recognizes his/her freedom, Beauvoir believed s/he must convert his/her freedom into *moral freedom* by participating in the world around him/her and actively manifesting his/her moral freedom through his/her creations and choices while always recognizing others' freedom. In conclusion, Beauvoir believed that morality goes as "*To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision*" (1947/1948, p. 09).

1.4.6.2. Ethics of Care

In her book *In a Different Voice* (1993) the American psychologist and ethicist Carol Gilligan introduced a new moral concept she called the ethics of care in which Gilligan pointed out that women perceive the world differently from men. In their eyes, morality and maturity are developed through social relationships and responsibilities one is tied to (as cited in Enomoto, 1997).

Later on, the ethics of care became known as a reaction to the historical neglect of the feminine perspective in defining ethics by the dominant previous ethical theories. This approach saw morality through human beings' feelings and their care for those surrounding them, as opposed to the previous ethical theories that stood upon the notion of being impartial when doing the right thing regardless of anyone's feelings, including one self's. The ethics of care emphasized partiality as a basic moral value. One ought to show favoritism towards the ones s/he is responsible for and takes care of (Brezinsky, 2014).

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Gilligan (1993) summed up the concept of ethics of care stating *“This conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centres moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules”* (as quoted in Enomoto, 1997, p.351).

The American philosopher Virginia Held (2006) criticized the previous moral theories that excluded the reality of human emotion and dependency. She argued that individuals cannot naturally be independent and autonomous with everyone around them. She recognized a person to be moral only if s/he genuinely fulfils the needs of those under his/her wings. She also stressed the importance of considering and reflecting upon one’s emotions and educating them, which will eventually shape one's moral compass to recognize the wrong actions properly and avoid them.

1.5. Metaethics

On a different note, metaethics does not concern with what is moral or not, instead, it puts morality with all its terms, concepts, properties, judgments, rules, and laws under study. It explores the nature of morality itself.

1.5.1. Naturalism

Naturalists stated that ethical rules are merely propositions that could be right or wrong according to the universe’s natural mechanisms, which suggested that moral rules are not derived, in any way, from the human’s viewpoint but instead stand upon natural properties. One could differentiate between right and wrong solely by contemplating the natural needs, wants, and pleasures (Matthew & Lenman, 2021).

According to Matthew & Lenman (2021) naturalism suggested that diving into the natural world enlightens one and increases his/her moral knowledge exactly as it increases one’s scientific knowledge. Any ethical value could only be proven right by empirical research, which means that any moral fact shall basically be a natural fact. In addition, moral laws should be purely realistic and objective. For instance, one would state that killing is wrong; this statement should be based on realist and objective thinking.

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Since the ethical rules in naturalism involve contemplating and reasoning to recognize what would be good or bad, and they could also be verified or falsified empirically, they are counted to be cognitive. For example, slapping someone could be verified to be wrong because the reaction s/he would make indicates that s/he is in pain or they could be falsified by proving them to be wrong. For example, if one suggests that stealing could be justified and does not necessarily harm others always; they will have to prove their reasoning behind it, which is almost impossible, and this makes his/her statement false.

Ethical naturalists also saw that there is absolutely no need for one to resort to higher or divine power to recognize whether an act is right or wrong, instead, one's experiences and observations would naturally guide him/her to gain enough knowledge to know whether an action is correct or false. For example, if one steals something from someone, s/he will be causing emotional and financial damage to the owner of that thing, which normally would make them feel bad. This thinking process, according to naturalists, is enough for one to realize that stealing is wrong.

One of the main weaknesses of this theory is the fallacy of *Is-Ought* that was raised by the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Hume (1739) found it illogical that moral codes could be derived from how everything *is* in nature. Reasonably, one cannot just move from *is* to *ought to* without demonstrating the reasoning or giving evidence. He believed that there should be an explanation for why this assumption is made in the first place because just as something *is* in a certain way, it does not necessarily mean it *ought to* be that way, and all people shall abide by that.

1.5.2. Intuitionism

This theory claimed that moral truths could be derived solely from one's intuitions or gut instincts. In other words, one could intuitively use his/her logic and reason to recognize what *feels* right or wrong (Philip, 2020).

In his book *Principia Ethica* (1903) the English philosopher Moore held onto the idea that *good* is intrinsically indefinable. He argued that moral facts are independent of human beings and cannot be defined categorically. However, certain moral values could be recognized by using one's intuition. He added that people, for the most part, share the same intuitions about moral truths, which leads to developing a common

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sense of what is considered good or vile. On the other hand, Moore also noted that not everyone could access their intuition to process what is right or wrong. He insisted that being fully mature and completely sane is a must for one to be able to be in touch with his/her intuition and allow it to take the lead to guide him/her in recognizing right or wrong.

Nonetheless, this theory still faced criticism because intuition itself is not proven to exist empirically in the first place, let alone depend on it to recognize moral facts. Additionally, the fact that not everyone could access their intuitions could put people in constant moral dilemmas, unable to decide which path to take. Lastly, one's intuition cannot possibly be entirely pure as s/he could be influenced by his/her culture and religion, which would result in people having different opinions about matters that could easily create a moral conflict trying to settle on one truth and decide who's intuition is right or wrong (Philip, 2020).

1.5.3. Non-cognitivism

Non-cognitivists argued that moral laws could be neither true nor false as long as they have not been proven through any sense of experience. They viewed moral judgments as utterly meaningless because a statement, normally, holds a sense of cognitive meaning after it has been confirmed or falsified through empirical research. They believed that human beings would never reach moral knowledge (Garner, 1967).

Non-cognitivism has three varieties, prescriptivism, emotivism, and expressivism. Prescriptivism stated that in moral discourse, one is basically given commands and imperatives. For instance, saying that *stealing is wrong* implies the same meaning as the command *Do not steal*. Emotivism claimed that when one states an action is wrong, s/he only expresses his/her emotions toward that specific action and incites the listener to share the same perspective. For example, if one says that infidelity is wrong, s/he expressed that they despise betrayal and want the listener to think the same. Expressivism included the concepts of the previous two; it pointed out that moral discourse implies nothing but non-cognitive attitudes that reflect one's desires, approval or disapproval of an action. In other terms, moral discourse is basically either cheering or booing actions. It could function just like the utterances *Booh* or *Hooray*, which are obviously not a reference to recognize what is

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right or wrong. For instance, if one says that killing is immoral, it would be similar to saying *Boo killing* to express his/her disapproval of killing (Bonevac, 2020).

However, non-cognitivism faced a lot of criticism, one of which was *The Frege-Geach problem* that was suggested by Peter Geach and Gottlob Frege, hence the name. Geach (1965) said that the sentence *Telling lies is wrong* and *If telling lies is wrong, then getting your little brother to lie is also wrong* share the same meaning because the regular reader could easily derive the moral of the two, which is *lying is wrong*. However, a non-cognitivist could not naturally make sense of the second premise because it is not expressing any personal emotion, approval or disapproval of any kind toward *lying*. So conditionals, and semantically complex sentences that do not express direct assertions, seem to perplex non-cognitivist because they are not expressing any emotion or moral position.

1.6. Conclusion

The current chapter presented the different theories that philosophers have adopted and believed they captured the essence of what morality shall stand upon. The different ideas discussed in this chapter gave an insight into how morality is sophisticated and cannot be contained in one concept, it could take many forms and shapes and manifest in different approaches and perceptions.

Chapter Two: Morality within the Halls of Academia

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2.1. Introduction

The individual's moral development has been an intriguing process for philosophers and psychologists for many years. Lawrence Kohlberg suggested a theory that divided one's moral development into levels that align with the development of his/her cognitive abilities. Meanwhile, some scientists preferred not to dive into morality at all and thought it would be better to separate the two.

This chapter explores Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory and discusses whether ethics are paramount in a scientific setting using Bernard E. Rollin's Frankenstein Syndrome Theory. Finally, it dives into Dark Academia and its themes, which is the literary genre of the novel that is under analysis in the next chapter *Vicious* (2013).

2.2. Moral Compass

In the first chapter, the researcher tried to explain the concept of moral compass, still one chooses to tackle the origin of the phrase until this phase of the study for its relevance. The *moral compass* phrase was used for the first time in 1821 by the British poet and author Anna Maria Porter in her book *Roche-Blanche: Or, the Hunters of the Pyrenees* (Origin of, n.d) to refer the internal ability that guides one in recognizing the right moral values and following them just as the navigational compass does help individuals in determining the right directions.

Likening the compass to one's internal ability to differentiate between right and wrong implies that one's moral standards are in fact stable and always pointing to a clear direction just as the needle in the compass is constantly and plainly pointing *North*, hence metaphorically speaking, if one loses his sense of right and wrong, his compass could be either misdirected or damaged (Moore & Gino, 2013) But how does one develop a moral compass to begin with?

Philosophers tried for ages to answer this question and came up with different theories as explained in the first chapter, however, they were focusing more on what is morality in itself instead of tracking how the concept of morality changes for human beings across their life and the factors that play role in that. On the other hand, psychologists took a different turn and have been attempting to first, understand the

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psychological processes that are involved in making decisions and the motivations behind one's moral or immoral behaviours and second, to find a link between these results and one's age to see if one's cognitive abilities have anything to do with developing his/her moral compass. One of the pioneers of moral psychology is Lawrence Kohlberg.

2.3. Moral Development Theory

The American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg was interested particularly in explaining how morality develops across one's lifespan. After being inspired by the work of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who believed that just as children undergo cognitive development across their life, they all also experience the same moral development and go through similar universal stages (1932/1962), Kohlberg conceptually agreed with Piaget and came up with his famous *Moral Development Theory*.

In his book, *The Psychology of Moral Development: The Nature and Validity of Moral Stages* (1984), Kohlberg explained the process he followed to conduct the study for his theory. Kohlberg asked a group of individuals that included children, teenagers, and adults. He would present them with different moral dilemmas to study their choices and the reasoning behind them. The most famous dilemma of his interviews is about a European man called Heinz whose wife is on her deathbed because of a disease, and the only cure that has the potential to save her life is unaffordable for him. Heinz cannot find any way around it and decided to break into the pharmacy to steal the drug and save his wife. Kohlberg asked his participants one simple question, which is: Should have the husband done that, and why?

Kohlberg was not really interested in whether the man's act is right or wrong, but he was aiming to analyze the reasoning behind his action through the eyes of his participants. In conclusion, he recognized that overall; there would be three levels with two stages in each to moral development (1984).

2.3.1. Level.1: Pre-conventional Morality

In the first stage of this level, the concept of morality is related to punishment and obedience. One would deem an act *morally wrong* only if they are receiving punishment for it. While in the second stage, one would solely focus on the reward of

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the act and seek his/her self-interest. According to Kohlberg's study, individuals with this approach are mostly children that are younger than 9 years old, however, some adults also could fall into this shallow type of perception, and there are even adult criminals who reflect the same moral level (Kohlberg, 1984).

2.3.2. Level.2: Conventional Morality

In the third stage, the concept of morality is based on people's opinions of the individual. One in this stage tends to be afraid of tarnishing his/her social image, so s/he tries to follow the social conventions. Whatever pleases people is deemed morally right in his/her eyes. In the fourth stage, one starts recognizing that s/he lives in a society that is ruled by strict laws that must be respected, so s/he starts regarding morality through the lens of law. Whatever action complies with the social norms and the laws is morally acceptable. Individuals who adopt this approach are mostly adolescents and adults in society. Generally, it is the final stage most of them reach (Kohlberg, 1984).

2.3.3. Level.3: Post-conventional Morality

In the fifth stage, one recognizes the laws that rule his/her society as part of a social contract, however, s/he also realizes that these laws are and will not always be in the favour of everyone, so when it comes to one's life or freedom, these laws can be put aside to serve a greater cause. In the sixth and last stage, one develops his/her own set of morals and rules, and when the social laws do not stand upon relevant reasoning that considers everyone's position and aims for justice, one resorts to his/her personal principles and acts accordingly. People who adopt this approach understand that normally laws should maintain order in society, however, as this cannot always be achieved by following societal rules, one finds her/himself compelled to use his/her individual post-conventional judgments (Kohlberg, 1984).

Like any other theory, Kohlberg received criticism for many different aspects of his research; the most prominent ones are from Carol Gilligan (1993) who argued that Kohlberg's theory cannot be accurate because his research subjects were initially all males. Excluding females from his research meant that the results cannot be taken into consideration in real life as it is technically androcentric, and societies are not built of males only. Others argued that individuals do not always behave according to what

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they think or say, which makes Kohlberg's results sceptical as his research is limited to theoretical situations. (Lotfabadi, 2005).

Now that one tackled how Kohlberg's psychological approach to morality, it is important to this study to check a more scientific point of view of morality. There has been a heated debate over whether there is a relationship between science and morality or whether they are completely separated from each other. Do scientists follow any sort of moral code when executing their experiments? And does science transcend morality as it is *normally* used for the greater good? And if yes, what about when its objective is far from any good?

2.4. The Frankenstein Syndrome

The novel that the researcher will be tackling in this work *Vicious* (2013) by V.E Schwab is centered around two college students who took it upon themselves to experiment with their human body and its nature until it got out of control, and they ended up making abnormal creatures out of themselves, which shares the same premise with Marry Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). So the researcher will be using *The Frankenstein Syndrome* for analysis in the next chapter as it approaches ethics in a similar setting.

As mentioned in the first chapter, Plato saw that the higher aim human beings should strive for is to lead a happy and good life, they are to seek what he called *eudaimonia*. In the contemporary world, there has been a debate about whether achieving a good, well-functioning life for human beings by intervening in human nature and nature in general, using modern technology tools is considered to be an ethical move or not, as eventually, it could possibly assist people in being a better version of themselves and live a better life-quality. However, others stood completely against that, arguing that human beings should not intervene with what they did not have a hand in making in the first place (Rollin, 1995).

In 1984, the American philosopher Bernard E. Rollin was invited to give a speech on the social and moral issues that genetic engineering raises. Upon his research and while preparing for his speech, he mentioned the topic to one of his colleagues who teased him by describing it as *The Frankenstein Thing*. This light-hearted comment

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piqued Rollin's interest and altered his approach to his research, so he decided to make this *Frankenstein Thing* his research premise (1995).

Rollin started by sorting out the relation that scientists have with morality. There are two claims in the science ideology, the first one states that scientific truths and moral truths are completely independent and none of them derives its validity from the other, while the second claim states that the procedures that are adapted to test and develop scientific truths should not necessarily adhere to moral rules (1995).

Scientists consider science to be value-free, it does not have to align with any rules or consensus conventions, simply because the main objective is to seek knowledge and all that matters in this equation is to unveil the truth. However, Rollin suggested that scientists resort to this claim, so they can go about their work without worrying about justifying whether it is morally wrong or right. They also willingly choose to ignore educating the public about the procedures they follow in their pursuit of the so-called knowledge, and that often knocks them off the pedestal and put them face to face with media criticisms and rumors that villainize them in the public eye (1995).

Consequently, the public is left in the dark when it comes to such sophisticated procedures. They become exposed to whatever the media decides to string about these experimentations, for instance, scientific engineering. In his book, *The Frankenstein Syndrome Ethical and Social Issues in the Genetic Engineering of Animals* (1995) Rollin refers to the public's reaction by an alternative name *The Frankenstein Syndrome*, after Marry Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), to reflect how people are so ignorant about this process that they prejudge it to be intrinsically wrong and scary only because all they know about it is its potential of creating abnormal species, monstrous even just like Frankenstein turned out to be. But what is so monstrous about it?

One of the reasons people stand against this procedure is primarily religious, they believe that it violates the sanctity of human life and that individuals must not intervene with that in any type of way. Such interventions could blur the lines between the species that could be created and human beings. Regardless of whether it would be in the favour of humankind or not, human life is God's creation and no one should try to play His role (1995). Additionally, Rollin recalled a conversation he had, in which he shared another implicit reason why religious people probably refuse these

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procedures, “as one Catholic priest told me in the 1950s, if humans start creating and radically changing life forms, one ultimate mystery which draws people to religion will disappear. Our hold on people will diminish, they won't need us as badly. In other words, humans will be as gods” (1995, p. 23).

Another reason goes back to Jeremy Rifkin's take on genetic engineering; he opposed it because he believed it reduces human life to a bunch of chemicals. This process then would only be transferring chemicals coded in the genes. However, because people do not want to be robbed of the value their human nature gives them, they refuse to be reduced to merely chemical representations. They do not want to be treated as tools and manipulated however the scientists see fit (Rollin, 1995).

Frankenstein's Syndrome portrays the fear and sceptics that people will forever hold toward science because although it has improved so many aspects of their daily life, it is still as equally threatening and considered to be a double-edged weapon. However, Rollin explained that he does not agree with the notion that deems genetic engineering to be inherently wrong, but he does agree that its consequences could be harmful because “*given our [humans] record, will probably do more harm than good with any powerful new tool.*” (1995, p. 64). The conclusion Rollin draws, and which applies to morality within science in general, is that people are not afraid of science itself and how it might affect humans, but they are anxious about what their fellow humans could do with this new knowledge that might potentially bring new abilities because they know human nature and they do realize how vicious they could truly be.

On a separate note, scientists and their approach to morality too have been criticized as they often fall into the trap of *academic moralism*.

2.5. Academic Moralism

In his article, *The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory* (1998) The American legal scholar Richard A. Posner criticized the contemporary moral philosophers for their constant attempts to be *moralists* that take it upon themselves to dictate and set the moral rules that one should follow.

Academic moralists, as he called them, aim to influence individuals' beliefs and enlighten them with moral knowledge that clears them the way and leads them to be moral. Posner opposingly insisted that moral knowledge does not necessarily provide

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a moral motive to act upon. He believed that academic moralism, in fact, cannot change one's behaviour or make him/her more moral because if one knows what is right, it does not always imply that one will choose to do it.

Academic moralists promote moral universals, but Posner embraced the notion that morality is primarily local, he suggested that there are only tautological universal morals. For instance, saying that *murder is wrong* where the word murder itself implies an illegal and wrongful killing. This, according to him, meant that there are not any standard moral truths that shall be followed universally, and that moral relativism in which one's action is considered to be moral or immoral according to whether it submits to the ultimate goals and norms that a society share, is the closest that moral philosophers got to understand what morality *might* be about.

Academic moralists also use different tools to elaborate their standpoints and prove them such as reflective equilibrium (Posner, 1998) where one questions his/her judgments and tries to find a coherent link between them and his/her beliefs (Norman, 2020) or casuistry where they use canonical texts as references to back up their positions. This makes them sound pretentious in Posner's eyes because their arguments mostly are the outcome of moral intuitions or self-interest.

Additionally, Posner saw that academic moralists do not have the knowledge they claim they do to argue, defend, and justify their positions, and so they are not qualified to dictate to people how to act in the face of their primal instincts and natural tendencies. He affirmed that academic moralism is not at all part of the equation for people when they find themselves stuck in moral dilemmas because of their moral intuitions (1998).

Finally, Posner noted that choosing moral philosophy to be the centre of one's professional career does not permit him/her to conduct moral duties as s/he sees fit. Ironically, he mentioned that moral philosophers often end up being more *immoral* than others because of how easily their brains adapt to rationalizing any stance they take and make it seem *right*. This also results in creating a sense of superiority that washes over them because of their academic status and make them believe they are in a higher position than the rest of the society where everyone else is beneath them and have to follow their personal moral code that is essentially self-

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driven and away from any altruistic motives or purely good intentions for a better society (1998).

In conclusion, academic moralism does not affect one's behaviour or alter his/her mindset into a moral one. If anything, academic moralists are in constant competition to spread beliefs that would serve their personal interests and paint their subjective take on morality as the epitome of an ideal society.

Literature as a part of academia is often a reflection of society with all its aspects, including its flaws. Many authors have been mirroring academic moralism in their work in one specific literary genre called *Dark Academia*.

2.6. Dark Academia as a Literary Genre

Over the years, there have been many different literary genres that emerged and others that are fading into dust as people's interests and preferences altered into different and brand-new genres. One specific genre gained a lot of recognition in the last decade and piqued people's interest as it has been exploring darker aspects of human nature and more twisted corners of the human mind in an intriguing, unapologetic, and candid manner. It allowed its readers to take a glimpse inside the prestigious halls of the academia and the dark mysteries its walls could hide, hence the name Dark Academia.

Although the genre only got its name in the last decade, it always existed as many authors were experimenting with their imagination in science-fictional settings. The genre can be traced back to Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) in which she explored the horrors that science and knowledge could inflict on its seeker's morality.

Then, Donna Tartt published her debut novel *The Secret History* (1992), which laid the basis of the dark academia genre. As the name suggests, it is set within the academic sphere, which is also a distinguishable feature of the campus novel genre. However, dark academia literature often follows a group of privileged students who are relentlessly pursuing more knowledge and regard it as their ticket to the brilliancy that they believe will satisfy their ego and set them apart from the environment they are part of, then, the storyline continues until it takes an unexpected mysterious or murderous twist, and that is where the gothic element surges. These twists are the core

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of this genre because that is where the reader finally gets to see the reality of the main characters. For the most part, the characters are cold-hearted individuals whose desire to achieve that academic milestone seems to be a fair excuse for how they do it.

The aesthetic of dark academia has been quite popular among Generation Z- the individuals born from 1997 to 2012- because of its widespread on different social media platforms, from Tumblr and Instagram to TikTok. The Internet users found themselves enthralled by the gothic and academic aesthetics, be it the vestimentary style that varies between skirts, sweaters, blazers, and ties that all fall under the colour palette that includes black, brown, burgundy, forest green, or lighter tones of them (Vila, 2022), or the overall eerie atmosphere that they could create by the distinct decoration that relies heavily on candles, mugs of coffee or tea, and ink pens to build themselves an alienated corner from everyone, on both levels physical and mental (Taylor, 2022).

2.6.1. The Literary Themes of Dark Academia

There are many different themes that dark academia explores as a literary genre. I will be discussing these themes in some of the most prominent dark academia books including *Babel: An Arcane History* (2022) by Rebecca F. Kuang, *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt, *If We Were Villains* (2017) by M. L. Rio, *Bunny* (2019) by Mona Awad, and finally *Vicious* (2013).

2.6.1.1. Isolation from the World and Seeking Academic Validation

This theme focuses closely on isolation from the rest of the world, even from families. Although they might be mentioned at different points of the story, they still are portrayed as emotionally-unavailable figures. That often pushes the main characters further into filling yet another void with academic validation from other figures inside the walls of the academy, which are depicted mostly as strict professors that strive to bring the best out of their students at any expense, and that too takes a toll on them emotionally and physically but is romanticized through their eyes (Taylor, 2022).

In *Babel: An Arcane History* (2022) by Rebecca F. Kuang, the main character Robin Swift finds himself in the custody of an English teacher after his entire family

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die because of cholera. The teacher, Professor Lovell puts Robin through a very strict schedule to learn different materials to prepare Robin for becoming a student at the prestigious royal institute of Translation, *Babel*.

In *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt, the main character Richard finds himself enthralled by the way his Greek literature professor Julian portrays madness and the loss of self-control, she even goes further to romanticise the freedom of being unrestricted and invites her students to dive deep into the spellbinding worlds that Greek literature could open for them, which eventually takes a dark turn.

In *If We Were Villains* (2017) by M. L. Rio, Camilo, Frederick, and Gwendolyn are the academic figures that the main characters find themselves under their mercy. They often overwork them, and that causes them emotional breakdowns that these professors justify by implying that the path to greatness consists of nothing but hard work even if it is at the expense of one's mental and physical health.

2.6.1.2. Reality-detachment and Elitism

The main characters are often completely detached from reality. They do not fathom the natural principle that there would be consequences to their actions, and they act on whims. They are confident because of their belief that their privilege puts them at a different level from the rest of the people, which is essentially what the genre aims to emphasize. The corruption that gets buried and overlooked among the so-called Elite of the society, and how their privilege that descends either from their family legacy, wealth, or power and status, earns them a free pass to do whatever they wish, however they want, and to whomever they choose without worrying about the outcome (Taylor, 2022).

In *Babel: An Arcane History* (2022), the main character Robin Swift is not the one in privilege but he attempts to stand against it instead. Once Robin realizes the amount of injustice that is practised by the British Empire all over the world thanks to the silver-working in *Babel*, he joins a secret society called *Hermes Society* and starts trying to sabotage the empire from within.

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In *The Secret History* (1992), Richard keeps trying to be part of a clique that he first meets in his Greek literature class, however, this group quickly reveals to be nothing as it seems from afar. As they have killed another classmate to cover one of their crimes, Richard finds himself in a middle of a mess that he never intended to be part of. The clique is far too enchanted by the illusions Julian paints for them that they do not even realize the severity of their actions; it is almost as if they are hypnotized and live in a completely separated realm.

In *If We Were Villains* (2017), the group that the novel follows is acting students that study Shakespeare, and they often seem totally detached from the real world as they constantly recite lines from his plays in their day-to-day dialogues which would seem completely odd to anyone who is not part of their group. Nothing matters in their eyes but mastering their roles and getting an opportunity to be the main characters on stage. This group too ends up committing a crime that eventually ruins most of their friendships, and brings to the surface the danger of ambition when it gets out of control.

2.6.1.3. Morally Grey Characters and Bildungsroman

Dark academia explores human nature without any filters. There are not any innocent or heroic figures in the books of this genre, but instead, their personalities are exposed for what they are. They are sometimes an intriguing combination of good and evil and other times, horrifying pure evils. Additionally, the authors of this genre interestingly can string a story making evil or morally grey characters the protagonists and managing to make the readers root for them. The genre emphasizes the characters' moral and psychological growth and dives into the struggles they go through. They strive to find their place in the world, and that makes them relatable to the readers because it is a common phase that all regular human beings experience, which, on the other hand, is a theme that dark academia shares with the bildungsroman (Taylor, 2022).

In *Babel: An Arcane History* (2022), the main character Robin finds himself in an internal battle between doing what he believes is right and losing everything he has been working so hard all these years to achieve. The transition he goes through and how the consequences of his actions make him start doubting how far he could

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actually go to prove his standpoint is all a relatable struggle to young adults, probably not in the exact same way, but definitely in a way that aligns with their own stories.

In *The Secret History* (1992), none of the characters is utterly good, they all are horrible in their own way and their concept of morality is almost inexistent or at least can be described as questionable. However, by the end of the book, one would find her/himself drawn to the characters and even sympathize with some of them as they all seem to have their own reasons, even if not justifiable to their actions, the reader still feels some sort of a confliction towards how s/he is supposed to feel about them.

It is a similar case in *If We Were Villains* (2017), as the murder they committed is exposed, the reasoning of the murderer leaves the reader bewildered whether to deem his/her action wrong as s/he literally took someone's life or to sympathize with him/her as they had their reasons to do so.

2.6.1.4. Fantasy Elements

Many books in the genre integrate fantasy elements in the plot to give the story a supernatural and otherworldly dimension (Taylor, 2022) such as *Babel: An Arcane History* (2022), where the power of the entire British empire intriguingly lies in magical silver bars, in *Bunny* (2019) by Mona Awad, in which the characters perform magical and strange rituals to create charming young men using rabbits' blood, or *Vicious* (2013) by Victoria E. Schwab where the two main characters' science experimentations end up turning them into supernatural creatures called ExtraOrdinaries.

2.6.1.5. Celebrating Individuality

In addition to these mentioned themes, Dark Academia also reflects the cons of one's desire to self-efface him/herself and blend in a group for no apparent reason but because everyone deems it to be the right, or the *cool*, thing to do.

In the majority of dark academia books, the character's downfall starts the moment they want to abandon who they truly are and go out of their way to pursue something that they probably do not even want in the first place, but because everyone dictates them so, they go with the flow and choose to join and follow suit.

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Dark Academia wants to point out that one is to celebrate his/her individualism including his/her identity, language, beliefs, opinions, and overall being as it is the only thing that s/he knows by heart and can trust it is not to get twisted.

2.6.2. Criticism to Dark Academia

Dark academia as a literary genre receives a lot of criticism from scholars who deem it a shallow genre that is there for aesthetics only or celebrates elitism's destructive and irresponsible behaviour at the expense of other marginalized groups in society (Taylor, 2022). In fact, this genre brings to the table the same conversation, but it approaches it from a totally different perspective. Although it might be a celebration for the ones who adopt the visual style of it, the literary aspect of this genre aims to expose the truth of how elitism, in different ways, gnaws at the people surrounding the elite and the elite themselves equally.

2.7. Conclusion

The current chapter provided detailed information about Moral Development Theory and The Frankenstein Syndrome that will be used as tools to analyze Schwab's novel *Vicious* (2013). It also introduced the literary genre that the novel belongs to, Dark Academia, and the themes it tackles. This chapter served as a theoretical basis for the next chapter, which will be entirely practical and analyze the characters' moral development across the novel, and study the approach they adopt in a scientific setting when it comes to morality.

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3.1. Introduction

Vicious by V.E Schwab principally discusses the darker side of academic ambition when it gets out of control in a scientific setting, and how quickly it can turn one's greatest dreams into nightmares. The novel's analysis depends on two theories; Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory and Rollin's Frankenstein Syndrome Theory.

This chapter tracks the protagonists, Victor Vale and Eli Ever's moral development in detail and sorts out the factors that controlled their moral compass. Moreover, it discusses Victor and Eli's moral reasoning while diving into a science experiment that potentially would mess up human nature. Finally, it draws a conclusion to the possible factors that affect their moral approach to the world.

3.2. The Protagonists' Moral Development

People often aim to be a better version of themselves, and that includes strengthening their moral compass so they can lead a good life. However, defeating one's demons is a constant challenge that does not end up gracefully for everyone. The characters in this novel experience an incident that turns their life upside down, but also puts them face to face with an unfiltered version of themselves where their demons are louder and crueller than ever, and end up bringing their conception of morality into question. In the following section, their moral development journey is tracked. Before reading what is coming, one advises the reader to have a look at the novel's synopsis on page (69) for better understanding.

3.2.1. Victor Vale

Victor Vale is a conflicted soul. There is a sense of conflict and contradiction about him that is extremely complicated but very simple all at once as its roots are very clear.

Victor grew up in a house with absent parents who were famous authors of self-help books. As they were constantly on tour, he found himself growing up alone, distant from them and also holding some sort of a grudge towards them that he often deflected, but it was crystal clear anyways. Victor expressed his resentment creatively, he would grab one of his parents' books and black them out, leaving only a

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few words that when put together, make full sentences. However, these sentences were far from what self-help books usually are made for:

He took an immense pride in paring down his parents' works, stripping the expansive chapters on empowerment down to simple, disturbingly effective messages. He'd been blacking them out for more than a decade now, since he was ten, a painstaking but satisfying affair. (Schwab, 2013, p.13)

On a moral scale, Victor's sense of obedience and punishment is almost inexistent from a very young age as he clearly had been getting away with doing whatever he wanted simply because his parents were not exactly present in his life to raise him upon the equation that his wrong actions will lead to getting punished. Victor grew up with a distorted concept of morality, his definition of right or wrong all depends on whether the action satisfies his desires or not. At this point, Victor was still in the first level of morality, the pre-conventional morality.

Victor's hollowed relationship with his parents did not hinder him from being academically brilliant; in fact, he poured all of himself into his studies, Victor's obsession with academic validation recalls one of the most prominent themes of the dark academia in which the elites regard academic achievements as their main purpose in life, as the narrator reveals:

Everyone at Lockland believed him to have an affinity for medicine, an effortless, nearly preternatural understanding of the human body (in truth, it was far from effortless, but Victor did have a knack for guessing). The body was a machine, only necessary pieces, every component at every level, from muscle and bone down to chemical and cell, operating on action and reaction. To Victor it just made sense. (p.71)

So when it was time to choose a thesis topic, he was adamant about choosing a topic that is challenging to prove his brilliancy, again. Victor did not like easy because easy was accessible to everyone, and he does not want to be everyone.

However, Eli Cardale, Victor's best friend and roommate, expressed his interest in a way more challenging and brilliant topic, Victor's contradicting feelings towards his best friend finally start coming to the surface, to the reader that is.

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Victor did not hate Eli, but he certainly did not love him either. Instead, he was charmed by the way Eli could put on a shiny mask that hid underneath a completely crooked side of him. Victor was persistent in bringing out that side of him, the true and more interesting side of Eli:

What fascinated Victor *most* was the fact that something about Eli was decidedly *wrong*...He was born for the sports teams and the clubs, but he surprised everyone, especially Victor, by showing no inclination whatsoever to join either. This small defiance of social norm earned him several notches in Victor's estimation, and made him instantly more interesting. (p. 17)

Eli's topic of research is *ExtraOrdinary* -EOs- people, which are a certain kind of human beings that possess supernatural abilities. At this point, Victor did not exactly believe in their existence, but Eli's fervour to figure out more about them piqued his interest. Victor was able to see that twisted side of his personality coming to light whenever he talks about them, so he decided to hang onto EOs because they brought the dark and unfiltered version of Eli that he always saw in him.

Eli's research advanced and he realized that EOs could be made after a human being goes through a *Near Death Experience* –NDE- This discovery lit an urge inside Victor's chest. His envy and jealousy all mixed together, and he suddenly wanted this research to be his. So he started thinking of ways to become an active part of this research and not just a spectator.

Victor started trying to convince Eli to make an EO. He lured him with the potential of becoming *heroes* if they succeeded in making one, and although Eli refused at first, Victor manipulated him into doing it as Eli was already swayed by the possibility of becoming a *hero*, "*You asked me if I ever wanted to believe in something. I do. I want to believe in this. I want to believe that there's more.*" Victor *sloshed a touch of whiskey over the edge of his glass. "That we could be more. Hell, we could be heroes"*" (p. 53).

Victor volunteered to try to kill himself first, a NDE required him to go the extra mile to guarantee its success. Victor knew that if he succeeds in becoming an EO, he will be in the spotlight of the research, and not only an assistant to Eli:

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He wanted the chance to hold the power, the evidence, the proof. He wanted to be the proof. Without it, this was Eli's monster, and he was merely the wall off which Eli bounced his ideas. With it, he was the monster, essential, inextricable from Eli's theories. (p. 56)

Victor is not doing this out of curiosity, for the sake of science, or to help his best friend in his research. Victor is volunteering to nearly sacrifice his life only so he could be the main event, not a watcher. Victor is chasing nothing but his self-interest. He is not considering any side consequences to his act, including death. At this point, Victor is stuck at the second stage of pre-conventional morality. Nothing he does is calculated for its possible harm or punishment, all that takes over his mind is what he will be gaining out of his action. What seems right is only what serves his motives.

It is important to note that Victor is 22 years old as these events are taking place. Kohlberg labelled children that are younger than 9 years old and adult criminals to this level of morality, and this places Victor as an adult criminal. Interestingly, Victor is aware that there is something different, maybe twisted, about him because of his approaches and perception of people and life in general, and that is what draws him into Eli in the first place, he sees the same thing in him. He just cannot put his finger on what exactly this is, *"Victor wondered about lots of things. He wondered about himself (whether he was broken, or special, or better, or worse) and about other people (whether they were all really as stupid as they seemed)"* (p. 28).

Self-awareness and self-judgment are two important aspects of the realm of morality. What intrigued Victor even more is to unveil the reality of his friend at any cost, *"Angie had stolen Eli from him, too. The more interesting Eli, anyway. Not the one with perfect teeth and an easy laugh, but the one beneath that was glittering and sharp, like broken glass. It was in those jagged pieces that Victor saw something he recognized"* (p. 27).

Victor tried to kill himself by overdosing, but as he failed to become an EO, Eli decided to try instead and he succeeded. Victor could not bear the fact that Eli, again, is one step ahead of him, so he decided that he has to try to end his life again, only without informing Eli.

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However, this time, Victor decided to get the help of his friend, and Eli's girlfriend, Angie Knight, who Victor is convinced he stole from him, he manipulates Angie to help him to electrocute himself, and she does. Victor dies, but he comes back to life, unaware that his ability could inflict a great amount of pain, he accidentally kills Angie.

Victor becoming an EO is a turning point in his moral development. It alters something intrinsic within him because although he kept trying to feel something, anything, for the fact that he literally just caused the death of the girl he supposedly loved, he could not bring himself to feel anything, even the guilt was absent:

He knew he should be panicking, but he felt numb, and the numbness made him calm. Was it shock, he wondered, this steadiness that came to him now, that had been so easy to summon with Angie dying at his feet? Or was it something else? (p. 110)

At this point, the moral compass seems to be trying to find its way, but Victor's moral compass seems it was broken even before he turned into an EO:

Victor looked down at the body then, expecting to feel some shade of the guilt that had washed over him when he'd lied to her before, but there was nothing. He wondered if Eli had felt this strange detachment, too, when he woke up on the bathroom floor. Like everything was real, but nothing mattered...He felt nothing. And right now, nothing felt amazing. Nothing felt heavenly. (p. 111/113)

However, his inability to feel did not hinder him from fleeing the crime scene before someone catches a glimpse of what he did. Although he was numb emotionally, he still could rationally think that being caught there will inevitably take him to jail. He still feared the authorities and was capable to realize that what he did was wrong, not because it felt wrong, but because it violates the laws.

At this point, Victor is in the second level of moral development, conventional morality. He is in the fourth stage in which he realizes laws and rules should have been respected, murdering someone clearly goes against that, and so now that he is still unable to recognize right or wrong depending only on his moral compass as it seems to be broken, he unconsciously resorted to the laws that rule his environment.

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The first person that Victor called after he became an EO and murdered Angie is Eli, who immediately called the cops on him, informed them that he is an EO, and tried to trick him into staying in the area so they can catch him. Victor, however, realized that Eli was trying to set him up and run away but it does not take long before the cops arrested him for being the main suspect in killing Angie and also because they suspect he is an EO. Victor is caught, investigated, and kept in a cell, but as Eli's betrayal left a sour taste in his mouth, he already started planning how to escape.

At this point, Victor is no longer considering the laws and does not care about what is morally right or wrong according to the rules. He is back at square one, thinking of his interests and choosing to go the extra mile to do what he wants and deems to be in his favour, so he kills his cellmate and the guard and goes his way to confront Eli for betraying him. This just further reflects how Victor's moral compass is almost inexistent after he turned into an EO. Killing innocent people just to get his way did not even seem to trouble him, as long as it is serving his cause.

Going back to their apartment, Victor realized that his numbness has nothing to do with his shock whatsoever, but it was all related to his EO nature. He was aware that his mind felt less restricted than before his death as he was not considering the consequences of his actions because of the fear's absence. He did not fear anything simply because he knew that there is nothing that ever could pain him, *"The fact that the physical absence of pain could elicit such a mental absence of panic was at once unnerving and rather fascinating"* (p. 113).

Victor confessed that he has always been someone who would lean into violence without any regard to the harm he could inflict if he could, but there was a restriction that the social rules imposed on him. Victor before dying was trying to maintain a clear-cut social image and bent his head to the laws. He was at the third stage of conventional morality. However, now that he is numb, he is back to doing what primarily serves him, regardless of whether it is right or wrong:

He could track his thoughts better now, marveled at the way they circled round to solutions that bypassed caution and favored the immediate, the violent, the rash...Victor's mind had always been drawn to those solutions, but he had been impeded by an understanding of right and wrong, or at least what he knew others saw as right and wrong. (p. 121)

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Victor confronted Eli, and after torturing him for betraying him, Eli managed to fight back and shot Victor, hoping to kill him but he miraculously survived and ended up in jail for 10 years.

At 32 years old, Victor broke free from the jail along with a friend he made there named Mitch Turner, with two words on his mind, *Revenge* and *Eli*. On their way to find a place to stay in, Victor and Mitch came across a little girl shot and laid on the floor. Victor's ability to manipulate pain also included feeling it, so when he noticed that she was practically in so much pain, he offered to help and take her with them.

The girl is named Sydney Clarke, and in cosmic irony, she too was shot by Eli and her sister Serena because she was an EO. Throughout the novel, Sydney and Mitch seem to be the only two people that, in a way, bring out the *good* in Victor. The remnants of his humanity only show when he is around them. He cares or pretends to, and he does it well. Sydney even calls him a *good* person several times, *"Because you [Sydney] don't think I'm a bad person," he said. "And I don't want to prove you wrong...He felt a faint pang of guilt at involving Mitch in this at all"* (p. 206/207).

On the other hand, Victor for the longest time believed Eli to be the exact opposite of what he showed on the surface. Seeing how no one could manage to see through him often perplexed him, and even made him doubt the evil he saw in his best friend. Victor even accepted to take the villain's title in this narrative. However, seeing that Eli's monster finally took over him and he became a mass murderer soothed him. Eli was as bad if not worse:

As he stared down into the faces of the dead, all he felt was a kind of quiet joy, a vindication. He'd been right about Eli all along. Eli could preach all he liked about Victor being a devil in stolen skin, but the proof of Eli's own evil was spread across the counter, on display. (p. 166)

However, Victor too was out for blood, and as he started planning how to reach Eli, Sydney's ability was useful as she could resurrect the dead. They could revive one of the EOs that Eli has killed, Barry Lynch, and sent with him a cryptic note to Eli in order to inform him that Victor was out of jail, had Sydney beside him, and was coming for him.

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Victor's moral compass at this point is still ruined, he does not do anything out of the good of his heart, everything is calculated and planned only to get his way and serve his interests once again. Anything standing in his way is eliminated without a second thought. At some point, he even considers using some EOs as bait to lure in Eli:

He didn't care about the blue-haired girl, or any of them for that matter. He was more interested in what the dead proved about Eli than what the living offered him. He'd meant them only as bait anyway, to be dug up and used as lures...““Why do you care?” “I don't,” said Victor, simply. “Not about you [Dominic Rusher], that is. But the one who wants to kill you? I want him dead. (p. 168/287)

Victor avoided killing people, not because it was wrong, but because dead people could not be used and that served him with nothing. Regardless, if someone stands in his way, they die, *“It wasn't that he shied away from killing; people simply weren't any good to him dead. After all, pain didn't have much effect on corpses”* (p. 232).

Moreover, Victor had to learn how to ground his ability in order not to become a walking threat and draw attention to himself for no reason. Then, he had to structure some sort of rules that he could follow to avoid unnecessary killings:

Victor didn't feel guilt, or fear, or even a sense of consequence, not like normal people. All those things had been dead—or at least dulled to the point of uselessness—for years. But he'd trained his mind to reconstruct those feelings from memory as best he could, and assemble them into a kind of code. Nothing so elaborate as Eli's set of rules, just a simple wish to avoid killing bystanders, if possible. It didn't feel wrong, resting his finger on the trigger, but his mind provided the word wrong. (p. 303)

During Sydney's stay with them, Victor multiple times expressed that he cared about her overall safety, however, there are many nuances to this caring. After knowing her ability and how unique it was, he made sure she stays alive, but he did not mind dragging her into a crime scene or a cemetery to revive certain individuals that he used as pawns in his game. Victor only cared when it suited him and aligned

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with his goals. Mitch described it best, *“There are no good men in this game”* (p. 254).

Victor was not a good guy; he just knew how to play his cards to switch between his bad and worst personas. Everything is allowed in order to achieve what he has in mind, which means his moral development never surpassed its first level. It could be his EO nature that took away something vital from him when he died and obstructed the development, as he mentioned to Eli in their first confrontation after he died, *“You feel different, too. Death takes something with it. What did it take from you?”* (p. 125).

Victor's plan worked out perfectly with the help of Sydney, Mitch and another EO named Dominic Rusher who traded his ability to teleport with getting rid of the chronic pain that his NDE caused him. That was Victor's way of doing things, he exploits the needs of people because he is aware that this way, he could own their loyalty without coercing them into it.

As the moment of meeting Eli finally was approaching, Serena, Sydney's sister appeared in front of Mitch and tried to kill him but Victor intervened and cut her throat, then asked Mitch to burn the body because he did not want Sydney to find it and resurrect her. Victor was still only thinking of himself and his interest, Serena's right to live or Sydney's feelings did not matter in this equation because her existence was a threat to him and to his plan.

In conclusion, Victor never really grew out of the pre-conventional level of morality. He was leading a double-faced life before dying and becoming an EO. Before, he found himself obliged to level up to the conventional morality to coexist and save his life, but not because it is what he truly believed to be right, he just adhered to what people deemed to be correct to keep himself socially relevant and safe but after his EO conversion, it all faded into dust.

It could also be the fact that his ability turned off the pain. Pain and fear are intrinsically linked, and usually keep people from crossing the lines. People fear being in pain, so they avoid doing things that could potentially hurt them physically or emotionally, but if the pain factor is entirely absent, would they still be the same? Victor obviously was not. His fear was non-existent, and so the calculation for the

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consequences did not occur to him because if he is not going to feel them in any way, why should he even care?

3.2.2. Eli Ever

Eli is an artful person. He successfully managed to portray the image of a brilliant person, and if not for Victor's close remarks, one could never tell that there was something beyond his sly smile, as this description suggests, *"He was like one of those pictures full of small errors, the kind you could only pick out by searching the image from every angle, and even then, a few always slipped by"* (p. 16).

Eli's background was ambiguous. Although Victor spent with him a little over two years, he only learnt that he had an abusive father right before Eli attempted his first NDE. This information provides a little insight into the kind of obedience and punishment Eli grew up with. He was abused by a parent figure that supposedly is there to guide him to differentiate between what is correct to do or not by decently disciplining him.

However, Eli seems to have grown up with a distorted approach to right and wrong as he was abused and did not have the opportunity children usually have to freely make mistakes and learn from them without it taking a physical or an emotional toll on them. His conception of morality is all derived from his fear, and once his fear is gone, he could be vile. Eli's first level of morality is pre-conventional morality; his fear of his father's cruel punishment controlled all the reasoning behind his actions.

Eli and Victor met in their sophomore year; Eli happened to share the room with Victor who at first was not pleased by having someone else living with him, but unexpectedly, Eli charmed him. He did not charm him with his polished image, but Victor would often see a shadow taking over Eli. It seemed darker and the complete opposite of Eli's personality on public display. The evil inside him that shined through in little moments piqued Victor's interest, as the narrator confirms:

Eli seemed perfectly normal, but now and then Victor would catch a crack, a sideways glance, a moment when his roommate's face and his words, his look and his meaning, would not line up. Those fleeting slices fascinated Victor. It was like watching two people, one hiding in the other's skin. And their skin

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was always too dry, on the verge of cracking and showing the color of the thing beneath. (p. 16)

Eli's choice to go for EOs as a research topic came from the same place as Victor's. He liked having the attention of his professors on him, the praise and the amazement he constantly saw in their eyes made him feel good about himself. However, he also was curious about EOs, this curiosity has never explained from where it sprang, but Eli was clearly a religious person. Everything he did came from a strong faith within him. So he wanted to believe in something that had the potential in making a revolutionary discovery that sets him apart from everyone:

Everything starts with belief,” countered Eli. “With faith”...Well, when you wonder something,” said Eli, “doesn’t that mean part of you wants to believe in it? I think we want to prove things, in life, more than we want to disprove them. We want to believe. (p. 25)

The enthusiasm Eli had for this research topic was clear because he poured all his focus and efforts into coming up with the theory of how these EOs are made, and that was the first crack in the glass. Eli claimed it was supposed to be only theoretical, but Victor saw through that. He knew that there was part of Eli that was aiming for more, so he lured him in with the idea of becoming *heroes*, and Eli gave in to the possibility. Eli's obsession with being different, better, and superior was already coming to the surface:

Victor watched the way that Eli’s eyes took on a sheen when he spoke of EOs, and the change in his tone—lower, more urgent—matched with the nervously shifting muscles in his face as he tried to hide his excitement. The zeal peeked through at the corners of his mouth, the fascination around his eyes, the energy in his jaw...It was as if Eliot Cardale had found God. Even better, as if he had found God and wanted to keep it a secret but couldn’t. It shone through his skin like light. (p. 27)

Up until he died and became an EO, Eli has been very careful about how to carry himself in front of people; his professors, his girlfriend Angie, and even Victor. However, as Victor too was holding back his monsters inside and made sure to appear as civilian and decent as possible, he could always catch a glimpse of Eli's monsters.

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Victor saw something he recognized. Something dangerous, and hungry. But when Eli was with Angie, it never showed. He was a model boyfriend, caring, attentive, and dull, and Victor found himself studying his friend in Angie's wake, searching for signs of life. (p. 24)

Eli was afraid of ruining the perfect social image he had, even if it was at the expense of an internal battle, he preferred to be the *good* boy. At this point, Eli was at the second level of his moral development, in the third stage where one's definition of what is morally acceptable or not depends on what the people in his environment deem to be morally correct or not. He adhered to these social rules in order to blend in and not have people's eyes on him for the wrong reasons.

Eli's name was Cardale, however, he decided to change it to *Ever* because he wanted to be remembered forever. This thought specifically showed how desperate he was to be someone that cannot be forgotten. His conception of himself as an individual who is on earth for a superior purpose was always there within him, he only felt the need to bury it down because he could not risk coming off as a maniac with a hero complex, but this was about to change drastically.

After Victor became an EO and killed Angie, Eli's conception of EO changed completely. The moment he knew Victor killed Angie, he came back to his senses and realized that they in fact created monsters, not superheroes. The only contradictory aspect of this conclusion was that he believed himself to be different. Eli's ability was regenerating, he could self-heal, and this made him believe that God specifically gave him this ability for a divine reason, the narrator further explains, "*In his eyes, I think that makes it somehow pure. Divine. He can't technically use his power to hurt others*" (p. 149).

Eli told Victor that EOs are a mistake and that they should not exist because they are against God and nature. However, he held onto the idea that he was not because before he tried to kill himself, he put himself into God's hands and He brought him back for a purpose:

His lips were moving faintly, and even though his hands hung at his sides, Victor knew he was praying. It perplexed him, how someone about to play God could pray to Him, but it clearly didn't bother his friend...Maybe it's not

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random. Maybe there's some correlation between a person's character and their resulting ability. Maybe it's a reflection of their psyche. (p. 65-82)

Nonetheless, Eli was well aware that he too was feeling the same numbness Victor was experiencing, but what is even worse is that Eli seemed to have always been like this, the feeling of a void inside him was not as intense, but it was there. Eli refused to give in to this truth because it would mean he is the same as Victor and every other EO, it would mean his existence is a mistake too, *"He'd felt the hole before she [Angie] died, felt it even before he died. The feeling—the lack of it—had only ever come in glimpses, like a cloud passing overhead. But from the moment he woke up on the bathroom floor, the shadow had settled over him, a sign that something was wrong. Not wrong, he forced himself to think. Different"* (p. 180).

Eli at this point was twisting the reality of things to suit his narrative because in fact, since the moment he died and came back to life, he felt something within him missing. Eli was not mad that Angie died, he was mad that Victor, an EO that was made as a result of his research, turned out to be a murderer. His feelings were terrifyingly not reflecting what he was supposed to feel, and this alerted him that his humanity was completely gone:

He wanted to care, he wanted to care so badly, but there was this gap between what he felt and what he wanted to feel, a space where something important had been carved out. And it was growing. He'd told Victor the thing he lost was his fear but that wasn't quite true because he was still scared. He was scared of that rift...Whatever this gap was, it was there for a reason, there to make him stronger. He had to believe that. (p. 178-179)

However, what makes his case even more dangerous than Victor's is the fact that he is practically immortal. His body heals itself, nothing ever could hurt him, and consequently, nothing ever could really scare him. Since his entire moral system was built on his fear of people's having misconceptions about him, he became boundless. At this point, Eli was witnessing a transition from the conventional morality level to the pre-conventional level of morality. All his actions from this point forward were about to be executed only to serve his purpose regardless of whether they would harm anyone else.

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Eli decided to make executing EOs his purpose. Excluding him, every EO had to die but as he was not doing this for the greater good but was motivated by self-interest, he ended up taking innocent people's lives too in the process.

The progress Eli made in his research about ExtraOrdinary people was all assessed by his professor Lyne, who grew rather fascinated and even more curious after Eli's discoveries. However, now that Eli had realized the massive mistake they made, he did not want to continue pursuing this research. Professor Lyne, on the other hand, refused to stop the research, and this led to a quarrel between him and Eli that ended up with the professor losing his life. Before killing him, Eli admitted to his mistake of indulging Victor and trying to turn themselves into heroes, he realized that he was playing God, but he was adamant that he will not give anyone the chance to do this again using his research:

I died begging for the strength to survive, and it was granted. But it's a trade, Professor, with God or the devil, and I've paid for my gift with the lives of my friends. Every EO has sold a part of themselves they can never have back. Don't you see? (p. 183).

Right after Eli's first intentional murder, he recalled that a janitor saw him walking into the university right before Lyne's death, and so Eli killed the janitor too. In a span of a few days, Eli murdered two innocent people only to protect himself but he had to twist it in his head and make himself believe that he did it out of caution to pursue his *divine* purpose.

At this point, Eli's moral development is fully at the first level, the pre-conventional morality. Eli was no longer caring about the social image he carefully crafted before he died. The line between what is right and wrong blurred in his mind, and he was ready to rationalize any action he did just to pursue the purpose he claimed God has given him by gifting him that ability. In reality, Eli was only doing this because it made him feel less bad about the fact that he was an EO, a devil as he described. Although he was trying to cover it by his *divine* purpose, he was doing it all out of his egocentrism:

EOs are wrong, and I am an EO, so I must be wrong. It was the simplest of equations, but it wasn't right. Somehow, it wasn't right. He knew in his heart

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with a strange and simple certainty that EOs were wrong. That they shouldn't exist. But he felt with equal certainty that he wasn't wrong, not in the same way. Different, yes, undeniably different, but not wrong. (p. 186)

Denial blocked Eli from drawing clear lines between right and wrong. His self-assurance and act of projecting evilness onto others gave him relief and even pride in achieving the mission that God himself chose him for:

He'd seen a demon wearing his best friend's skin, but Eli didn't feel like there was any evil in himself. If anything, he felt hands, strong and steady, guiding him when he pulled the trigger, when he snapped Lyne's neck, when he didn't run from Stell. Those moments of peace, of certainty, they felt like faith. (p. 186)

Every time, he killed an EO, Eli felt *peaceful* and *satisfied*. He convinced himself that this feeling meant God's approval of his crimes but actually, it was just his sick-minded nature manifesting in these serial murders. He found it easier to pretend that he is God's soldier to get rid of EOs than actually admitting that he too went against nature and God out of his greed to be a *hero*, became an EO who lost a vital human thing within and finally found himself facing his true monstrous nature. Death took something of him the same way it did with Victor, it took off his mask and his apathetic self finally came to the surface:

He wiped his hands on his jeans, and retrieved the backpack from the landing, but couldn't bring himself to leave. Instead he stood there, waiting, waiting for the sense of horror, the nausea, the guilt, to come up to meet him. But it never came. There was only quiet. (p. 184)

Being a mass murderer made Eli feel like his true self that even before dying he was trying not to let out. He was executing EOs, not so they could not violate nature and God, but so he could continue feeling that satisfaction, "*There was a moment of such perfect quiet, the kind he used to feel in church, a sliver of peace that felt so ... right. It was the first time he'd felt like himself, like more than himself, since he'd come back to life*" (p. 184).

Eli met Serena, after tracking her for being an EO, planning to kill her, but because she could control people's minds to do whatever she wished; he could not end her life.

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Her sister, Sydney, was also an EO, and in Eli's dictionary that meant she must die, so the two teamed up against the 13 years old girl and tried to kill her. Even so, Sydney managed to escape after being shot and that was when Victor found her.

Eli's moral reasoning did not change over the years, if anything it only got more twisted as he had beside him a person who could control everyone into trusting him and his methods blindly. Eli always loved the attention. At first, when he was trying so hard to sell the good boy image to people, he was doing it out of fear of having the wrong kind of attention. Nonetheless, he always would do the most to get the right kind of attention, for instance choosing EOs as a research topic. So as Serena made everyone utterly believe that he was a *hero*, it gave Eli the ego boost that he was longing for:

He didn't want to admit that there was more to it than that, that he'd *wanted* an audience...“Eli Ever is a hero. A hero. A hero.” The words echoed and followed them out. Eli followed Serena through the precinct, as the words sank in. A hero. Wasn't he? Heroes saved the world from villains, from evil. Heroes sacrificed themselves to do it. Was he not bloodying his hands and his soul to set the world right? Did he not sacrifice himself every time he stripped away an EO's stolen life? (p. 174-237)

Eli was portrayed as a hero for his heinous crimes and he had an audience to cheer for him, and that fed Eli's attention-seeking self. This goes back to how his entire divine purpose was, in reality, nothing but him giving in to his animalistic urge to kill, he was doing it for no other reason but because it made him feel *good*.

Eli had a list of EOs in each area, and in Merit, there was only one more EO left, besides Victor, Sydney, Serena, and himself of course, so he went after him. Simultaneously, Victor was also going after him. Mitch accompanied Victor to meet him while Eli was there. Mitch noticed Eli and approached Dominic, the EO, to warn him. In no time, Dominic disappeared and only Mitch was left in Eli's sight. Eli did not hesitate and killed Mitch as he realized that he was the same man who had been helping Victor. However, Mitch was not an EO, and Eli supposedly condemned killing only when it came to an EO, so again he had to twist the reality of it to soften the blow.

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He shouldn't have killed Mitch Turner. He knew that. But it wasn't as though the man were innocent, not truly. Eli had seen the police records. Turner had sinned. And those who ally themselves with monsters are little better than monsters themselves. (p. 286)

Killing Mitch is a very important point; it goes further to display Eli's true motives. Although he admitted it was wrong, Eli did it anyways. He knew that leaving Mitch alive would probably give Victor more steps ahead of him, and he hated being left behind, so he killed him for absolutely no reason but because he *wanted* to and because it served him at that moment. Eli's moral development never moved from the pre-conventional morality level. He still was doing all it for his own sake, only this time, he could not twist it in any way and portray it as a sacrifice for God.

Once Victor and Eli finally meet, Victor said "*I watch you, and it's like watching two people*" (p. 311) which is the most accurate way to describe Eli, double-faced, hypocritical, and manipulative. He claimed to stand for one thing but went out of his way to be exactly the very same thing he swore to destroy.

Eli kept claiming that he has always been misunderstood and that he sacrificed himself and bloodied his hands for God, but Victor knew better so he stabbed him and continued torturing him until Eli got the chance to fight back and killed Victor. Right then the police arrived, and as Victor killed Serena earlier, the police department was no more under her spell. They arrested Eli while he was still claiming to be a hero:

You don't understand," gasped Eli. "No one understands." "When no one understands, that's usually a good sign that you're wrong...The madman who'd murdered two people at the Falcon Price building, all the while claiming to be some monster-slayer, some hero. (p. 311-318)

Eliot Cardale, or Eli Ever, was always a monster. A monster that just mastered how to hold back and keep his demons quiet enough for him to put on a whole different personality. His moral reasoning at first was all derived from his yearning to craft a perfect social image that he worked hard to maintain up until he died. After becoming an EO, he could not keep the act on anymore, it was all dropped and he found himself eye to eye with the most genuine version of himself, the evil persona that would do anything and go above and beyond just to satisfy its needs. Eli tried to twist that and

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convince himself that it was God's mission he was executing, but the more and more time passed by, his ego-centric reality kept resurfacing to expose the fact that he all along had been nothing but a monstrous murderer.

3.3. The Protagonists' and Frankenstein Syndrome

Whether science and morality should always be considered in the same frame or not is still one of the debates that receive variations of opinions from scientists, philosophers, and academics. However, when scientific ambitions start violating basic human rights such as the right to life, does the debate still stand?

The characters in *Vicious* were extremely blinded by their scientific ambition and what it could yield; however, this took a dark turn as soon as their motives altered to something more sinister.

3.3.1. Victor Vale

Victor Vale did not at any point consider whether the scientific experimentation he and Eli were about to do violated moral rules or not. His main focus was settled on being in the spotlight of a revolutionary discovery in the scientific field; he wanted to be the discovery.

Victor's approach to morals in this setting is not strange considering his perspective on the world and how he always thought of people as inferiors compared to him. The possibility of being at a superior level was tempting enough for him to go on this experiment without any second thoughts that he even volunteered to be the first one who tries to kill himself.

Furthermore, Victor's opinions of EOs did not change. Even after spending several years in jail because of it, he still could not see the moral reasoning behind executing them. His manipulative nature instead thought of every EO as an asset. However, he was not a vigilante when it came to executing them. Victor did not really care whether they stay alive or not, but he also did not support killing them because it would not serve him in any way:

Victor wasn't sure how he felt about EOs...If he'd had to judge based on the two of them, then ExtraOrdinaries were damaged, to say the least...The difference between Victor and Eli, he suspected, wasn't their opinion on EOs.

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It was their reaction to them. Eli seemed intent to slaughter them, but Victor didn't see why a useful skill should be destroyed, just because of its origin. EOs were weapons, yes, but weapons with minds and wills and bodies, things that could be bent and twisted and broken and used. (p. 266)

Victor did not have Frankenstein syndrome. He was not frightened by what their scientific experiment created, and he certainly was not against it. However, Victor definitely was not cheering for it for the right reasons. He saw an opportunity in conducting research that would put him on a pedestal without questioning the moral dimension of it, so he tried to take it without knowing that it will backfire on him.

Victor did not seem to regret participating in that experiment, killing himself, and turning into an EO. Although the experiment gave him an ability that tortured him at some points in which he could not control it, he still preferred having it. Victor's sense of morality, in general, was self-motivated, so it is not surprising to conclude that he was not against messing with human nature and making ExtraOrdinary people that could be exploited and used in ways that would serve him more than it would generally harm him.

3.3.2. Eli Ever

Although Eli started his research about EOs claiming it would be theoretical only, he failed to stick to that too and ended up ignoring the moral dimension of it. His obsession with the potential of becoming a hero got the best of him. Eli wanted to be unforgotten, and what is a better way than being a hero to carve one's name in people's minds forever?

The first contradiction on Eli's part was the fact that he was a religious person. During his attempt to kill himself, he kept God in his thoughts. Nonetheless, he still was about to mess with the human nature that God Himself created, which is supposedly a red line for religious individuals.

Moreover, Eli's opinion of EOs only changed the moment he heard that Victor killed Angie because although he was feeling odd and less of a human being since the moment he died and came back, he still could not bring himself to admit that there was something that intrinsically changed, or resurfaced, about him.

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Eli made up his mind that EOs were wrong and should not exist because they have abilities that could be harmful to regular human beings. Eli was convinced that once one dies, they never come back complete; they would always lack something and they cannot be the same people:

Eli said it best. He called EOs shadows, shaped like the people who made them but gray inside. Serena felt it. From the moment she woke up in the hospital, she felt as if something colorful and bright and vital was missing. Eli went on to say it was her soul; he claimed he was different. (p. 176)

At first, Eli was adamant to explain to the EOs the reasoning behind his killings before he executes them, but as time passed by, he gave up talking them into it as he became convinced that they will never understand it the same way he *did*, “*There had been a time when he spoke to the EOs, tried to impart to them the logic, the necessity, of his actions, tried to make them understand before they died, that they were already dead, already ash, held together by something dark but feeble*” (p. 173).

Eli had Frankenstein syndrome because he clearly was standing against EOs and their nature. According to him, they violate nature and God's rules, which is a common argument for people who have this syndrome. However, people who have this syndrome normally are not mass murders as they cherish human life and consider it to be untouchable, in fact, that is where their moral reasoning is derived from, they do not think of themselves as superior human beings who are to kill whomever they want to prove their point. Eli, on the other hand, would do whatever it takes, taking lives included, to further prove his self-righteousness.

Eli's sense of morality in general is self-driven. He had the Frankenstein syndrome, and he portrayed it to be derived from his religious beliefs, claiming that creating EOs is sinful because they are devils in disguise of human flesh. Then, it is also against nature because EOs come back to life lacking a vital thing within them that is necessary to coexist with regular human beings, which is their humanity. However, regardless of whether these arguments are true or false, they were not what controlled Eli's actions. They were only his way to justify the heinous crimes that he committed because of his twisted urge for destruction. Eli is a manipulative person, so the way he used such arguments in his own favour is expected. Either way, he ended up behaving in the same way that he claimed makes EOs threatening and against God and nature.

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3.4. Between Bad and Worse, Victor Vale and Eli Ever: A Synthesis

Victor and Eli both saw something crooked inside each other that mirrored the sinister part of themselves that they tried for so long to bury. This was what made both connect to each other at first. Then, there is also the fact that they both had an almost unstable life growing up, the parent figures in their life failed them greatly, and they seem to have been carrying this resentment towards life and everyone that was just waiting for the right circumstances to manifest in something wicked.

Following their moral reasoning across the novel is intriguing. Although at first, they seem to be two sides of the same coin, there are certain moments where they prove to be completely different from each other. They are not better than each other, still evil, but they execute it differently.

On one hand, there is Victor who approached everything rationally. All along, he cringed from religion, faith, or fate. His moral compass depended on nothing but calculating rationally whether the action he was about to do or the decision he was about to take would serve him sooner or later. There were no external factors that influenced his moral reasoning. He remained loyal to his plan to take his revenge on Eli, to himself, and his interest only.

On the other hand, Eli contradicted himself all along. He claimed that he was religious and everything he did was by God's approval, but he never remained loyal to that. Multiple times, he violated the rules he made for himself out of a personal desire to get something that he knew would benefit him. His moral compass was almost inexistent as he was not following any specific set of rules as he claimed, instead, he did whatever it took to be satisfied with himself, but he kept twisting it in his mind and to the people around him to justify his actions and give them a heroic dimension.

Between Eli and Victor, there was no better and worse. It was purely a story of who was bad and worse only because Victor was not a hypocrite. He was simple, and the reasoning behind his moves was clear from where it was derived. However, Eli was deceiving, cunning and sly, and the way he could effortlessly pretend to be the one thing he claimed he was opposing made him the worst in this equation.

In conclusion, Victor and Eli never truly moved from the first level of morality. They remained trapped in pre-conventional morality as they never took a step back to

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analyze their actions' reasoning and judge it away from whether it would favour them or not. Their perspective was limited to their interest, and they were too blinded by their personal desires to think outside of the box and approach each other, the people around them, and life in general, differently.

However, when looking back at their life and how they spent most of it, one could make sense of why they never managed to see beyond themselves. As mentioned before, one of the main themes in dark academia is the students' excessive obsession with knowledge, and how they often tend to romanticize consuming themselves while striving for academic brilliance. This leaves no room for personal development for individuals outside of academia, they are completely detached from reality that they do not experience and learn in the *school of life* as the other regular human beings do.

Victor and Eli seemed to have poured all of themselves into nothing but their studies and then into their EOs research. At some point, Victor even refers to Angie, his friend and Eli's girlfriend, as a distraction for them both. This reflects how nothing actually mattered for them, even before becoming EOs, but their academic presence.

Achieving the highest level of morality, post-conventional morality requires one to exist in real life and witness real struggles from discrimination and injustice that people face on a daily basis, to be able to develop a sense of empathy and understand that law often does not serve everyone justice, then one would structure a personal set of rules that are ideal for oneself to follow and advocate for others' rights at the same time.

Eli and Victor's life was odd, the two spent most of their younger ages studying hard, then one ended up in jail and the other took it upon himself to play God's soldier on earth and turned to be a mass murderer. Nothing about their life was normal enough to provide them with the chance to learn what the real world actually looks like. Regardless of whether it was their personal choice or not, they did not experience the world as normal adults do, and that could be the reason why their moral development remained distorted.

As for Eli and Victor's approach to morality within science, the researcher suggests that they both fell into the academic moralism trap, only in different ways. Victor believed he was superior to everyone else because of how intelligent he is, everyone

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else was dull and stupid to him. This approach is sometimes adapted by academic moralists who are convinced they are better than the rest because of their academic status, and everyone shall bend to what they deem right. As for Eli, he found a way to rationalize his twisted tendencies and tried to convince himself and everyone that his methods are right because his logic says so, and this too is often adopted by academic moralists. They utterly believe that they are always right, and their brains just start to rationalize any standpoint they choose regardless of how objectively wrong they are.

3.5. Conclusion

The present chapter provided an analysis of the novel's characters using Lawrence Kohlberg's Moral Development theory, in which the researcher described their personalities in detail and explained their moral development journey. Then, it discussed their moral choices in a scientific and academic setting using Bernard E. Rollin's *Frankenstein's Syndrome*. The researcher adopted these two theories as they track how the characters' moral compass is constantly shifting throughout the novel and also shed light on the possible outcome of separating science from morals. In conclusion, the researcher found that the peculiar life circumstances that the characters lived through might have obstructed them from growing and developing. Hence, their questionable approach to morals throughout the novel.

General Conclusion

Morality in academic settings still raises a lot of controversies. Many believe that academic endeavours shall never be bounded by moral rules. Others argue against it and invite academists to hold onto their morals as they are still part of society even with their academic status, and they shall think of what their actions may inflict just as everyone else.

Despite generations of philosophical arguments and attempts to conceptualize morality, the debate is still ongoing, and even drew new questions that inquire how human beings develop morally, and if the end justifies the means in the realm of morality. Hence, this research studies *Vicious* by V.E Schwab as she discusses what makes heroes and villains what they are through characters whose conceptions of right and wrong confusingly melt into each other, and their moral compass is mainly driven by what only they deem right.

In this vain, this research provided insight into the theories that moralists and scholars presented in which they approached morality from different angles, laid out their arguments, and left it to people to follow what aligns with their beliefs and their vision of the life they wish to lead. Additionally, it shed light on the literary genre of the novel *Vicious*, Dark Academia and discussed its themes through several novels that are considered to be the most prominent in the genre.

As the research's main focus is on morality within academia, the researcher found Lawrence Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory and Bernard Rollins' Frankenstein Syndrome Theory to be suitable to analyze the novel's characters as the former tracks the moral development of individuals and the latter discusses the factors that contribute into one's fear of separating science from morals.

The findings of this research revealed that there is no pattern for human beings' moral development. The characters' analysis using Moral Development Theory led to the conclusion that one's conception of morality could change over time, but not necessarily in the same way or for the better. The researcher suggested that the main factor that contributes to the moral journey of individuals is the way they experience life as young adults, and how they go about their purposes. Moreover, the characters'

analysis using Frankenstein's Syndrome Theory resulted in concluding that the issue never lay in separating morals from science, but in the possible ulterior twisted motives that one might have behind separating the two. Morals would not hinder human beings from development because science experimentations normally should aim for results that are set to be in the favor of human beings, and this automatically makes it adhere to the moral rules.

The study concludes that one's moral compass is defined by one's approach to life as a young adult, as it is the age that one's personality starts developing, along with his/her objectives and purposes as one would go above and beyond to achieve them, and this could be tempting to the extent of influencing his/her moral reasoning. Also, the degree of one's self-consciousness of the people and world around him/her plays a role in one's moral perception because the more one is out of his/her head, and tries to see the world in a less self-centred way, the more s/he will be able to develop a stronger sense of morality that is not driven by his/her self-interest and vice versa.

Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory has been criticized by some researchers, such as the fact that he built it upon experiments that only had males as study subjects, which if the further studies take it into consideration it can lead to amazing findings. Furthermore, the researcher recommends that future researchers analyze the novel using a different morality approach such as the philosophical theory of morality as accountability or analyze the sequel to the novel *Vengeful* (2018) as it could be an opening gate to learning more about the characters and provide a more in-depth analysis of the reasons they turned out to be the individuals they are. It also would give them a chance to continue tracking their moral development journey; and reveal whether their approach to morality within science ever changes. In short, there are many different unique ways for researchers to study this novel.

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List of Appendices

Appendix A: Author's Biography

Victoria Elizabeth Schwab is an American writer born on the 7th of July 1987 in California, but she spent her childhood in Nashville, Tennessee. At first, Victoria was planning to major in Astrophysics, but she ended up settling on Fine arts and graduating with her Bachelor's degree in 2009. (Rhea, 2021)

Schwab had a successful debut as she sold her first novel to Disney titled *The Near Witch* (Charaipotra, 2020). After that, she published nearly over 20 novels in which she celebrated science-fiction, magic, and superpowers, such as *Shades of Magic* series, the *Cassidy Blake* series, *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*, *Gallant*, and the *Villains* series that includes *Vicious* (V.E. SCHWAB, n.d).

Vicious received a lot of praise from different platforms such as Publishers Weekly (2014) and The Guardian (Brown, 2014), which were in awe of the intriguing characters' building. The novel also earned the top fantasy book award from The American Library Association (2014).

Schwab won the Goodreads Choice Awards twice, once for *Vengeful* and then for her latest book *Gallant* (2022). Additionally, she participated as a creator and executive producer of the Netflix series *First Kill* which is adapted from her short story of the same name (Petski, 2020). Her next book is announced to be titled *Black Tabs*, but she has not revealed the exact publication date yet (Tor, 2017).

Appendix B: Synopsis

Victor Vale and Eli Cardale-Ever- were roommates and best friends with a shared ambition for brilliance and science. When the two have to choose a thesis for their senior year at Lockland University, Eli takes the road less travelled and chooses ExtraOrdinary-EOs- people to research. Eli's research ends up with a theory that EOs are people who experience near-death experiences –NDE- and come back to life with special abilities or superpowers.

Victor's conflicted feelings towards his best friend start coming to the surface as Eli's discoveries ignite a fit of jealousy in his chest, and he starts thinking of how to involve himself in Eli's research. So he decides to convince Eli to put his theory to the test, which quickly takes a dark turn as the two dive into a series of suicide attempts, and eventually die.

However, once they come back to a totally twisted version of their previous life with supernatural abilities that turn their lives upside down and unveil a scarier egocentric part of themselves. Their new abilities get into their heads and turn them into nemeses after Eli stabs Victor in the back, which results in his imprisonment for 10 years. The moment Victor breaks free, he starts haunting Eli with one purpose in mind, revenge. There are no superheroes in this narrative; Vale and Ever are both villains on their own terms.

Appendix C: The Novel's Characters

1. Victor Vale

Victor Vale is one of the protagonists of the novel. One of his favourite hobbies was blacking out his parents' self-help books and leaving sentences that were not exactly helpful to anyone reading. Victor did not like people, he thought they were stupid and dull. The only two people that seemed to pique his interest were Eli and Angie, and later on, Mitch and Sydney. Victor made it his life purpose to take revenge on Eli after he shot and betrayed him, so he does whatever it takes to reach him. He is manipulative, and his moral compass depends on whether doing these actions would benefit him or not.

2. Eliot Cardale - Eli Ever-

Eliot Cardale is one of the protagonists of the novel. He was known to be among the most brilliant students at Lockland University for his extreme intelligence and charismatic self. He was charming and seemed to be a decent human being on the surface. However, Victor noted that he always saw something more sinister in him that made him more interesting. After Eli died and became an ExtraOrdinary, he made it his life purpose to execute EOs because he believed they were against God and nature. His true nature resurfaced, and he turned out to be a hypocrite, mass murderer, delusional, and self-righteous person. His moral compass depends on whether the action would benefit him and make him feel satisfied with himself.

3. Sydney Clarke

Sydney Clarke is one of the side characters in the novel. She is an EO with the ability to resurrect the dead. Sydney had always admired her sister Serena, but after Serena cooperated with Eli to kill her, she decided that she did not want to be like her anymore. She met Victor after she escaped from Eli and Serena, and so Victor took her to stay with him and Mitch. It did not take long before Victor knew about Sydney's history with Eli, and so she started helping him with his plan to reach Eli.

4. Serena Clarke

Serena Clarke is one of the side characters in the novel. She was Sydney's older sister. She was an EO with the ability to control people's minds into doing whatever she said. She met Eli after he was tracking her to kill her. She agreed with Eli that EOs are wrong and should not exist, so she started helping him by manipulating people into believing whatever he dictates to them to be on his side against Victor.

5. Mitchell -Mitch- Turner

Mitchell Turner is a side character in the novel. He met Victor when they were both in jail and as he realized that Victor possessed an unnatural ability, he decided not to stand in his way. However, Victor liked him and decided to take him as a friend. The two broke free from the prison, and Mitch continued helping Victor to execute his plan to reach Eli. He also helped Victor to ground his power when it got out of control.

6. Mark Stell

Mark Stell is a side character in the novel. He was a detective that was concerned with tracking EOs. He was the first person who interrogated Victor after Eli turned him in for killing Angie and becoming an EO. Coincidentally, when Serena was trying to manipulate people into being on Eli's side, she met him and convinced him to help Eli. However, Mark does not seem to trust Eli all along, and neither did Eli, so when Serena got killed, and she was no more able to control Mark, he arrested Eli for killing Victor.

7. Angela-Angie- Knight

Angie Knight is a side character in the novel. She was an intelligent person with high ambition and a longing for knowledge. She first met Victor, and they became close friends. Then, Eli came into the picture and she fell for him, and they became a couple. Angie lost her life while helping Victor to electrocute himself after he manipulated her into thinking that he might lose his life if she did not do as he said.

8. Dominic Rusher

Dominic Rusher is a side character in the novel. He was an EO, but his near-death experience -NDE- resulted in him suffering from chronic pain that Victor offered to take away only if Dominic accepted to help him and be loyal, to which he agreed. Dominic went the extra mile to help Victor and save Sidney and her dog Doll mainly because he did not want to struggle with his pain again.

9. Barry Lynch

Barry Lynch is a side character. Barry was an EO that Eli killed to string a play for the people in Merit City to think of him as a hero. However, Sydney resurrected him, and Victor sent a note with him to Eli in order to inform him that he was out of jail and coming for him. Barry died again during his mission after delivering the note to Eli.

10. Beth Kirk

Beth Kirk is a side character. Beth was an EO, and she had bright blue hair that Eli figured she was dying after her hair turned white because of her death trauma. She was also a student at Ternis College before Eli tracked her and tricked her into thinking he was interested in her before strangling her to death.

Glossary

1. Doctrine of the Mean

Aristotle's notion of virtue states that one has to find a middle ground in everything s/he does.

2. Utility calculus or Felicific calculus

A calculation made by Jeremy Bentham made a calculation for people to figure out the exact amount of pleasure or happiness their actions would result in.

3. Androcentric

Focused on males or dominated by them.

4. Bildungsroman

A coming-of-age novel that emphasizes the character's mental growth and psychological development