"It's What You Do that Defines You:" Christopher Nolan's Batman as Moral Philosopher

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IN 2008, THE DARK KNIGHT, CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S SEQUEL TO BATMAN BEGINS (2005), smashed box office records, earning over a billion dollars worldwide ("All-Time Box Office"). As it became one of the most commercially successful films in history, Nolan's film joined the ranks of many other box office hits in the last decade, which feature a comic book hero adapted (or re-adapted) for the big screen. Several of these popular films, including Nolan's Batman, depict a darker side of the "superhero" mythos, highlighting the humanity and fallibility of these figures and placing their actions under scrutiny. In this way, the films reflect the moral complexity and ambiguity of our own society, an element missing in many earlier superhero comic book films. Within Nolan's films specifically, this complexity allows the film to work as a site for postmodern moral interrogation as the central character, while under pressure, tests and discards various established ethical systems. Through the decisions he makes in critical moments in the films, Nolan's Batman also rejects many standard interpretations of the character's motivations. He acts against "traditional" Batman archetypes which suggest that the hero's actions consistently adhere to absolutist or utilitarian moral paradigms as he follows one or more of the following principles: a lust for revenge, a desire to prevent future harm, or a vow not to kill. What eventually emerges as Batman's guiding principle in these latest films is not an ethical system per se, but rather a simple desire to thwart the goals of his enemies. This oppositional morality allows Batman the moral flexibility to combat evil in various forms, but it also places his decisions in the hands of his enemies, allowing Nolan to question and test Batman's position as a popular hero. This process of questioning forces a re-evaluation of traditional, absolute understandings of heroism, allowing for a variety of new distinctions between hero and villain.

The study of Batman's actions and motivations in *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* originates with an examination of how Nolan's version of Batman fits into the larger character history. Since Bob Kane and Bill Finger created the first Batman comic in 1939, the character of Batman has appeared in a vast variety of films, comic books, graphic novels and television shows, each with a unique author, speaking to different audiences at different historical moments. Thus, analysis of a character like Batman creates its own special challenges, as each new piece of the ever-growing canon both stands alone and acts as a comment upon previous incarnations.

The threads of character similarity between various story arcs in the Batman canon produce a unique space of play for an auteur filmmaker like Nolan, who participated in his Batman films in the roles of writer, director and producer. Nolan's two Batman films

insert the filmmaker's distinctive worldview into this particular interpretation of the caped crusader. Nolan's work pushes and plays with the boundaries of the Batman mythos, adjusting the moral code which guides other versions of Batman, but it can only push the mythos so far before it would cease to function as a recognizable "Batman story." To test the boundaries of Batman as a character, the films must first incorporate established pieces of the mythos that mark them as a part of the larger "Batman story." While the primary focus here is the study of Christopher Nolan's two Batman films, the position of these films within Batman's longer character history cannot be ignored, especially as this position reflects changing interpretations of heroism.[1]

Earlier versions of Batman established some of these foundations for Nolan's eventual representation of his troubled hero. From the time of his initial appearance, Batman has passed through several distinct phases of development. According to creator Bob Kane, the Batman who originally appeared in *Detective Comics* #27 in 1939 was heavily influenced by both noir films and the heroes of pulp magazines (Robertson 52). With his dark suit, cowl and troubled history, Kane and Finger's Batman stood in stark contrast to Superman, who ushered in the Golden Age of comics a year before Batman's first appearance. Unlike Superman, Batman took his cues from the gritty, gruff, existentially minded detectives of pulp fiction. Thus, Kane's Batman resembles Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe more than Clark Kent. Gotham, the setting for Batman's escapades, adopted the shadowy, grimy feel of film noir, thereby rejecting the bright, shiny exterior of Superman's Metropolis. This initial version of Batman had no qualms about using guns or killing his enemies; he embraced his position as a violent vigilante in search of vengeance. Although, at the request of publishers, Batman writers developed a "no-kill" policy within a year of the character's creation, Batman's original attachment to violence reappeared in a position of prominence in later revisions of the character and, eventually, in Nolan's films. This violence is one element of Batman's history which blurs the line between hero and villain, thereby calling the morality of the hero into question.

After losing popularity in the late 1940s, the Batman mythos underwent major revision in the Silver Age of comics, from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s. During this period, Batman storylines shifted away from Kane's dark detective tales and instead turned toward lighter plots revolving around science fiction. This lighter tone eventually paved the way for the television series *Batman* starring Adam West, which aired from 1966 to 1968. The series embraced a campy esthetic which, though initially popular, eventually wore thin. Though the lighthearted depictions of Batman's heroism during this age are strikingly different from later, darker versions, they indirectly helped inspire these later works by prompting a movement back toward a dark, complex version of Batman at the end of the Silver Age.

When Frank Miller published *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986, he built on the momentum started at the end of the Silver Age. His work completely rejected the camp of the *Batman* television series. Rather than depicting an ethically spotless hero, Miller created a morally ambiguous Batman. Miller's representation of violence was intentionally brutal, and the popular "hero" tested the limits of vigilantism with his troubling actions. Miller's work redefined Batman, complicating his mythos. His work, along with Alan Moore's *Watchmen,* which critiqued superheroes in similar ways, set the tone for future superhero graphic novels.

In spite of the immense influence that *The Dark Knight Returns* had on graphic novels, Miller's postmodern critique of the superhero mythos did not gain prominence in popular superhero films until the 2000s. The filmic adaptations of Batman released between 1989 and 1997 all maintained a playful tone without questioning the role of the central hero too seriously. Tim Burton's *Batman* and *Batman Returns,* though dark, celebrated a bizarre, carnivalesque esthetic, while Joel Schumacher's *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin* hearkened back to the cheesy excess of the Adam West television series. Although *Batman and Robin* was not a complete commercial failure, it earned significantly less at the box office than any other Batman film to date, perhaps reflecting a decline in public support for overly cheesy, uncomplicated superheroes. Christopher Nolan's filmic reinvention of Batman, as played by Christian Bale, functions as a clear example of the shift that started with Miller. With *Batman Begins*, Christopher Nolan reinvigorated public interest in Batman as a hero. Nolan took Batman in a new direction, emphasizing the character's human limitations and seriously questioning Batman's role as a hero in ways that the previous films did not. Although Nolan's representation of Batman is similar to depictions which appeared in earlier graphic novels, his films introduced this morally complex Batman to the big screen for mass consumption.

Rounding out a long progression toward postmodernism in the Batman mythos, Christopher Nolan's Batman films display evidence of several specific connective strands which tie this specific Batman to the broader Batman canon. The films work as adaptations of multiple strands rather than one discrete story arc. In a 2008 interview for *Variety,* Nolan explained his approach to preexisting Batman works as he wrote the script for *The Dark Knight:* "[R]eally, we looked at the whole history of the comics and tried to absorb the highlights and commonalities from the evolutionary pool of artists and writers who've worked on the character for so long, looking at the common threads there" (qtd. in Thompson). Pieces of *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* specifically seem to draw inspiration from some of the most famous Batman graphic novels of the 1980s, including *The Killing Joke* and *Batman: Year One.* For example, in *The Dark Knight*, the character of the Joker, though brought to life by Heath Ledger's unique, Oscar-winning portrayal, takes some of his cues from the Joker created in Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*. Ledger's Joker parallels Moore's earlier work as he announces, "Their morals, their *code*, it's a bad joke, dropped at the first sign of trouble. ... I'll show ya, when the chips are down, these, uh, these *civilized* people, they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster— I'm just ahead of the curve" (*The Dark Knight*). This statement mirrors the moral anarchy of Moore's Joker, who claims at the conclusion of *The Killing Joke* that "I've demonstrated there's no difference between me and everyone else! All it takes is *one bad day* to reduce the *sanest man alive* to *lunacy*" (41). Both of these Jokers attempt to break down society's façade of civilization, demonstrating that any ordinary citizen, placed under the right circumstances, might break moral codes as easily as the Joker does. The Joker's "joke" in Moore's work, an attempt to drive Commissioner Gordon mad with grief, creates a precedent for the actions of Nolan's Joker, who attempts to push people out of the limits of comfortable sanity and into complete moral anarchy. Although this new Joker is unique, he channels aspects of earlier Jokers, especially Moore's version, in his performance. These similarities in the Joker make it possible to recognize how Batman's moral system has shifted over time, since Batman's responses to the Joker have not always remained constant. When Nolan's Batman reacts to the moral quandaries produced by

the Joker, he carves out his moral position not only in relation to traditional hero narratives but also in relation to previous versions of himself.

In spite of the general similarities between Nolan's Batman and other versions of the Batman, no Batman is completely identical to another, and although general characterizations and themes may carry through from one story to the next, there are critical differences between each unique Batman. For example, the move from graphic novel to film changes Batman's characterization at a very basic level. One characteristic of many (though not all) graphic novels is the constant narration from within the hero's mind. For instance, in *Batman: Year One*, the reader has constant access to the musings of either Bruce Wayne or Jim Gordon, the two primary protagonists of the story. Through this narration, the readers of the graphic novel have direct access to the motivations of the main character. As David Kyle Johnson and Ryan Indy Rhodes explain, "Even if the person in question did not turn out to be morally bad. . . we might still find out that those we once believed to be heroes were in fact morally unremarkable. Because Batman is a fictional character, however, he is not subject to this problem. We can have full access not only to everything he does, but all of his internal states and motivations as well" (121). According to Johnson and Rhodes, this interior access clarifies Batman's inner thoughts and motivations; this clarification helps readers understand Batman's actions.

Some adaptations of graphic novels attempt to maintain at least part of this inner access through the use of a consistent voiceover from one of the leading characters. For example, Zack Snyder's 2009 adaptation of *Watchmen* opens with a voiceover by Rorschach, reading the excerpts from his journal which also appear in the graphic novel. Through this voiceover, the film is set up from his perspective, offering the audience some insight into Rorschach's otherwise taciturn character. Christopher Nolan, however, chooses to avoid this direct access into Batman's thoughts. The lack of a voiceover creates distance between the audience and Bruce/Batman because Nolan only represents the exterior results of Batman's inner mental state on the screen. To gain insight into this Batman's motivations, one cannot simply read or hear and interpret his thoughts. Instead, audience members are forced to analyze his exterior words and actions to better understand his motivations. While it is important to recognize that even Batman's inner monologue may serve as an unreliable source of information, this access to interiority is completely absent in Nolan's filmic representation of the character.[2]

Rather than working through this lack of interiority to analyze Batman's character within these films, much of the existing scholarship on Nolan's revision of Batman largely disregards the hero, focusing instead on the character of the Joker, as played by Heath Ledger. One of the primary points of focus is the way in which the Joker resists one clear back-story for how he became what he is. Instead, he changes the story with each new telling. J.M. Tyree identifies the Joker's changing history as "fairly pointed mockery of the need for back-stories for villains in the first place, the easy psychoanalysis that reduces every choice to an after-effect of some early trauma" (31–32). Randolph Dreyer echoes this assessment of the Joker, claiming, "If we can learn more about him, maybe we can understand or even care about him" (81). Anthony Kolenic takes the analysis a step further, connecting audience discomfort with the Joker to media reactions to Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter. In both the film and the actual tragedy, Kolenic identifies an instinct to produce a history for violent individuals that would allow society to locate and isolate the causes of apparently senseless violence. What these

scholars have identified is a major part of what makes this version of the Joker such an unsettling villain. If the Joker's actions could be found to cleanly stem from a history of personal trauma, then audience members could understand, label and contain his brand of moral chaos. Throughout the film, however, the Joker repeatedly undermines this potential comfort by entirely changing his story each time he tells it.[3]

The inclusion of a character like the Joker, one who refuses to play by the traditional rules of villainy, has led some critics and scholars to identify *The Dark Knight*'s depiction of violence as a clear allegory for the use of force in response to global threats in post-9/11 America. For example, in a controversial article for the *Wall Street Journal*, Andrew Klavan contends that *The Dark Knight* is "a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush in this time of terror and war. . . . Like W, Batman sometimes has to push the boundaries of civil rights to deal with an emergency, certain that he will re-establish those boundaries when the emergency is past" (A15). After examining the character of the Joker, J.M. Tyree arrives at a conclusion similar to Klavan's: "Nolan has made a new adaptation to the legend in presenting his Batman movies as oblique but fairly transparent fables of counter-terrorism" (32). While the film may act on this level as a pure political allegory in which Nolan either critiques or praises the methods of the Bush administration, this type of analysis misses some of the broader issues Nolan's Batman raises as a hero working within a complex postmodern society.

Batman is only one part of a growing trend in which major films are following the pattern set by the graphic novels of the 1980s, giving prominence to troubled, complicated hero figures. *Watchmen*, released in 2009, and the two *Iron Man* films, released in 2008 and 2010, depict just two of several popular "superheroes" who, like Batman, possess no actual superhuman powers. These characters are flawed and human, and they reflect postmodernism's ambivalence toward absolutes.[4]

Iron Man's Tony Stark, the confident millionaire-turned-hero, playfully mocks established structures of authority, flaunting his ability to work as a hero outside of law and illustrating the arbitrary nature of our accepted codes. Rejecting the asceticism of other superheroes, he chooses instead to revel in the pleasures provided by his wealth. Saving the world is just a hobby, as it were.

At the other end of the spectrum are Nolan's version of Batman and the Rorschach character of Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* (who draws heavily from Moore's original comic). Unlike Tony Stark, these two characters highlight the violence inherent in vigilante justice.

There is nothing playful about these characters as they escalate their use of force in response to increased threats. This escalation of violence in film has caused some scholars to question the validity of continuing to hold up these figures as "heroes." At the 2010 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Sharon Lamb specifically targeted current filmic heroes such as Snyder's Rorschach and Nolan's Batman as negative role models for young men. She claimed, "There is a big difference in the movie superhero of today and the comic book superhero of yesterday. . . . Today's superhero is too much like an action hero who participates in non-stop violence; he's aggressive, sarcastic, and rarely speaks to the virtue of doing good for humanity" (qtd. in Batty). According to Lamb, the shift toward a more violent, antisocial kind of superhero has damaged the ability of the hero to consistently act with virtue. Ashley Cocksworth notes

a similar problem, asserting, "We cannot hope in someone like Batman, who although he is motivated by the good, arrives at the good via a morally ambiguous and violent route" (543). Lamb and Cocksworth both suggest that Nolan's representation of Batman has become so morally ambiguous that he no longer fits within the conventional definition of heroism.

While many popular superheroes of earlier generations may have served as unquestionable role models of virtue, newer heroes, like Nolan's Batman, reflect the moral complexity of our society. In the traditional hero's journey, as outlined by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the hero may face trials or temptations to test his spirit. In traditional hero myths, however, there is usually a clearly right and clearly wrong answer to these tests, even if the hero does not always select the correct option. In contrast to this structure, these postmodern heroes face situations in which a clearly correct answer may not exist. As Luke Evans points out, "In all of these narratives, the hero of the film must come to terms not only with his own implication in the harm done to others, but must accept that his ability to make finite choices sometimes results in the exclusion of generally good outcomes." Unlike heroes such as Superman, Batman lacks any truly superhuman powers, so he is sometimes forced to choose between two bad options when these sticky moral choices arise. Superman can avoid difficult decisions through the use of his superhuman powers, as he does in 1978s *Superman,* when he turns back time and literally appears in two places at once. Through this use of his powers, he is able to curb a massive flood *and* save Lois Lane. Batman, on the other hand, does not have the power to save both Harvey Dent and Rachel Dawes in *The Dark Knight*, and, forced to choose between the two, he loses both as the result of his limitations. Batman is only a *man*, and must face the consequences of his actions as the result of his humanity. In this way, he reacts to a society in which morally correct decisions are not always clear.

In response to these complicated scenarios, the Batman of *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* places societal values under stress, testing their stability. Unable to maintain every "good" value in conflicting dilemmas, Batman acts out the kind of moral critique which Friedrich Nietzsche describes in *On the Genealogy of Morals:* "We need a *critique* of moral values, the *value of these values* is for the first time to be called into question—and for this purpose a knowledge is necessary of the conditions and circumstances out of which these values grew, and under which they experienced their evolution and their distortion" (5). Thus, the Gotham City depicted within the films is one in which established moral codes are rapidly failing. In the extreme dilemmas depicted onscreen Batman tests the utility of various values, prioritizing and even discarding moral codes to achieve what he views as the best possible outcome. In this capacity, Gotham City serves as an ethical testing ground for audience members, too—a site where they can watch the utility of their own morals play out on the screen.

Batman's human weaknesses are necessary in this type of moral experimentation. Edith Wyschogrod's 1990 book *Saints and Postmodernism* supports the necessity of using a non-super hero such as Batman as a type of moral exemplar in a postmodern world. As she explains, "To lead a moral life one does not need a theory about how one should live, but a flesh and blood existent" (3). According to Wyschogrod, humans rely upon the lived examples of others to determine moral philosophy, and she uses the individual lives of saints as a site of excavation to uncover common strands of morality. Batman, as

a fictional character with obvious personal flaws, may not initially appear to fit into Wyschogrod's model of the moral exemplar. While Batman may lack the saintly nature of Wyschogrod's examples, however, he represents a difficult and complex morality built at the extremes of human existence, where his personal value system can either save or destroy human life. In these extreme, though fictional, scenarios, he is forced to break some moral codes to preserve others, and, in this way, his entire existence becomes a scene for moral play. Without acting out these extreme situations for themselves, viewers can witness how various moral standards hold up under pressure, allowing them to judge their own rankings of values. Perhaps the recent popularity of hero figures like Batman stems, at least partially, from this additional level of personal investment for the viewer.

To create this ethical play, *Batman Begins* establishes Gotham City as a site of moral crisis. As Rachel Dawes explains at the beginning of the film, "This city is rotting. They talk about the Depression as if it's history, and it's not. Things are worse than ever down here. . . . What chance does Gotham have when the good people do nothing?" (*Batman Begins*). Although Batman successfully takes down Carmine Falconi at the end of the first film, the city is still filled with crime and despair when the Joker enters the scene in *The Dark Knight*. In the moral chaos of Gotham City, the Joker attempts to dismantle and destroy societal codes. Rather than establishing and encouraging belief, the Joker instead hopes to tear down the presumed morality of the city, allowing people to free themselves from all structure, from all morality, and from all systems of belief. If Nolan's Batman films serve as the site for a Nietzschean critique of moral utility, then it is the Joker who embraces the role of Nietzschean *übermensch,* rejecting moral tradition and celebrating his ability to enact his will.

Throughout *The Dark Knight*, the Joker tears down perceptions of morality by setting up dilemmas in which the citizens of Gotham must choose between two negative consequences. His quandaries are like Hollywood recreations of the "trolley dilemma" created by philosopher Philippa Foot and later expanded by Judith Jarvis Thomson, in which subjects theoretically have to choose between actively killing one person or passively allowing many others to die. These scenarios raise the question of whether passively allowing something bad to happen is the moral equivalent of actively harming someone else.[5]

The Joker twists these quandaries further by adding an element of personal investment to the dilemmas, threatening harm to loved ones as the result of inaction. For example, the Joker offers Officer Ramirez money in exchange for helping him kill Rachel Dawes. Ramirez knows full well that if she does not accept the money, her own mother will die of cancer. Similarly, the guard Berg is faced with either killing Reece, a man he does not know, or allowing the Joker to blow up the hospital in which his wife is recovering, along with hundreds of other patients. In his final moral game, the Joker pits a ferry of ordinary citizens, including young children, against a ferry of convicted criminals. Each ferry has the detonator to a bomb located on the other ferry. The first ferry to blow up the other ferry will survive, but if no one makes a decision in an hour, they will all die. In each scenario, Gotham's citizens initially choose to save themselves and those closest to them, although intervention in the case of both the guard and the ferries prevents a harmful outcome. In the ferry scenario, a convict, rather than one of the ordinary citizens, chooses to throw the detonator overboard and potentially sacrifice

not only his own life but also the lives of those around him, further highlighting the self-preservation chosen by Gotham's law-abiding citizens.

In these scenarios, Gotham's citizens act in accordance with the moral philosophy posited by Kwame Anthony Appiah in *Cosmopolitanism:* "Whatever our basic obligations, they must be consistent with our being... partial to those closest to us: to our families, our friends, our nations... and, of course, to ourselves" (165). With this claim, Appiah explains that our moral responsibility to strangers does not outweigh our responsibility to those closest to us. While the majority of characters in Nolan's film tend to abide by this basic approach to ethics, the morality of placing the highest value upon personal relationships is complicated by the severity of the consequences, leaving no easy answers for the players in the Joker's games.

Like the other citizens of Gotham, Batman reveals his own priorities as he faces the Joker's tests. Of all of the Joker's moral quandaries, the one which sheds the most light upon Batman's moral philosophy is the last, in which Batman must decide whether to save the Joker as he falls off of a skyscraper. Immediately before this scene, the Joker has beaten Batman with a crowbar, attacked him with vicious dogs, and is standing over him in victory. As the Joker pulls out a detonator for the bombs located on the ferries, he begins to weave a tale of how he got his scars, which, until this point in the film, has always preceded murder or attempted murder. Even visually, the Joker appears in a position of power as the camera zooms in uncomfortably close to his face, filming him from below at a slight angle. Batman, filmed from above in a position of vulnerability, has every reason to believe that the Joker will not only kill him but will also kill all of the people still trapped on the two ferries. When Batman pushes the Joker off of himself and over the building's edge, he could justify the death as self-defense, and yet he chooses to save the falling villain at the last moment.

In this brief moment, the actions of Batman reflect his individual ranking of values, as he discards some proclaimed virtues in favor of his true priorities, thereby exposing his personal motivations. Although it is just one example of many situations in which the Joker forces Batman to make difficult decisions, this specific dilemma is particularly representative of Batman's priorities. As Batman faces the film's embodiment of ethical chaos, he is finally pushed to a point where he is unable to simultaneously maintain all of the positive value systems which he appears to espouse in less extreme scenarios. He must make a definitive response to the Joker, and this response reveals the core ethical system which underlies all of his other actions throughout the two films. In an examination of the scene, it becomes apparent that many of the existing explanations for Batman's motivations, as theorized through an examination of his history in graphic novels and film, fail to explain the actions of this specific version of Batman. Even the apparent explanations offered by Bruce Wayne earlier in *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* themselves do not completely explain Batman's actions.

Batman Begins maintains much of the traditional Batman origin story, which suggests that Bruce Wayne's driving force for becoming the Batman is rage over the murder of his parents and a desire for revenge. As Bob Kane, the original creator of Batman, explains, "Vengeance is a great reason... It would take all the violence, the rage, he felt inside over his parents' murder to fight injustice. It motivated him to take his vengeance on all the criminal element. Wouldn't you try to hunt the criminal if it happened to you?" (qtd. in Vaz 26–27). While this desire for vengeance is a common interpretation

of Bruce's motivation, it fails to fully explain why Bruce Wayne continues to act as the Batman after the demise of his parents' killer. Unlike Tim Burton's *Batman,* in which the hero conveniently discovers that it is the Joker who killed his parents, *Batman Begins* removes the possibility of direct revenge early in the film. Joe Chill, the man who killed Bruce Wayne's parents, is already dead long before Bruce becomes Batman, making an outcome of successful revenge impossible. The film attempts to gloss over this point by establishing the mob boss Carmine Falconi as the underlying reason why the Waynes died, but even after Falconi has been confined to a mental institution, Bruce, as Batman, still continues to brutalize the criminals of Gotham City. If Batman is acting out his right to revenge, there is no clear target for his actions, nor is there a direct correlation between criminals appearing later in the films and the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents.

As Batman faces the Joker, he suddenly regains the opportunity to act out revenge for the death of a loved one. If his main value truly were revenge, Batman would allow the Joker to fall to his death for murdering Rachel Dawes, in addition to hundreds of other innocent citizens of Gotham. Killing the Joker would allow Batman to exact the kind of revenge he was unable to take when his parents died. When Batman acts to stop the Joker from falling, however, he proves that, though he may harbor serious emotional scars from the death of his parents, the impulse for revenge cannot be his driving motivation. A desire for revenge may partially influence Batman, but in this specific scenario, under extreme pressure, he abandons an opportunity for direct vengeance in favor of some higher priority.

Although Batman refuses to enact direct revenge on the Joker, Bob Kane's explanation also suggests that Batman may be motivated by a broader desire to rid the city of the entire "criminal element." In this way, Bruce Wayne, through Batman, is able to protect the residents of Gotham from experiencing tragedies like his own, thereby alleviating the suffering of Gotham's citizens. In an analysis of Batman as a model for moral living, Cary A. Friedman agrees with this explanation, suggesting that Batman "takes the miserable situation life handed him and, unbroken and defiant, converts it into magnificent victory by working, constantly and tirelessly, to ensure that no one else suffers such senseless loss" (22). According to Friedman, Batman works primarily to prevent future suffering in Gotham. In *Batman Begins,* Bruce Wayne also supports this analysis, explaining to Ra's Al Ghul that "I seek—the means to fight injustice. To turn fear against those who prey on the fearful." When Bruce Wayne becomes Batman, he claims that at least part of his purpose stems from a desire to protect the innocent from injustice and prevent future tragedy.[6]

This interpretation of Batman's ethical code echoes the ideas of utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer when he claims that "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (231). If he primarily works to rid the city of crime, Batman, once again, would be justified in allowing the Joker to fall. The Joker has already proven not only his drive to create fear and destroy life but also his capability to act out his will. As illustrated by the Joker's successful assassinations of high-profile figures in Gotham, preventative measures are ineffective against this villain. Similarly, the Joker's almost immediate escape from prison proves the inadequacy of Gotham's established penal systems to confine or punish someone like him. Death or incapacitation appears to

be the only sure way of stopping his killing spree. If Batman's primary motivation is to maximize the prevention of harm, he would be compelled to let the Joker fall. When he saves the Joker, Batman prevents one death, but at what cost? Hundreds or thousands of innocent lives? The moral corruption of the entire city? Total chaos when all of Gotham's leaders have been slaughtered? From a purely utilitarian point of view, the cost of saving the Joker's life may not outweigh the evil his death would prevent, but Batman acts against this utilitarian view and saves the villain.

One possible explanation for Batman's decision is the idea that, in accordance with Singer's caveat, Batman may consider his involvement in the Joker's death as "sacrificing [something] of comparable moral importance." Morally, Batman may consider himself responsible only for his own actions; therefore, he does not have to hold himself account-able for what the Joker may or may not do in the future. In an article entitled "Why Doesn't Batman Kill the Joker?" Mark D. White imagines Batman's response: "No, the deaths that the Joker causes are his responsibility and his alone. I am responsible only for the deaths I cause" (12). This extreme scenario points to some possible issues with the utilitarian value of preventing future suffering at any cost. Through his decision to save the Joker, Batman illustrates that, for him, other values ultimately outweigh this concern.

Throughout all of the different variations on Batman, the character has, since the 1940s, held consistently to one value which appears to be at work in this situation: not to kill. Within *The Dark Knight*, Batman demonstrates his continued commitment to this one immovable standard as he says to the Joker, "I have one rule," to which the Joker responds, "Then that's the rule you'll have to break to know the truth. . . The only sensible way to live in this world is without rules. Tonight, you're gonna break your one rule." The Joker knows that Batman refuses to kill, and his final plans work to push Batman into using lethal violence. Thus, Batman's refusal to follow this plan may merely seem to be evidence of his dedication to his one main rule.

This apparently simple explanation is undermined and complicated by Batman's ear-lier actions. The scenario on the rooftop requires Batman only to allow the Joker to die, not to actively kill him. If Batman truly considers his lack of action in allowing the Joker to fall as killing the Joker, then his inflexible rule of not killing would cleanly explain his decision. An analysis of *Batman Begins*, however, reveals that Batman reacts to a strikingly similar situation in *Batman Begins* in a way inconsistent with a belief that allowing a death is the same as causing a death. Because *Batman Begins* illustrates the development and eventual calcification of the moral philosophy which *The Dark Knight* later tests under pressure, a comparison of the final battle in *Batman Begins* to Batman's battle against the Joker illuminates the ideology that is really at work for this Batman.

At the end of the *Batman Begins*, Batman overcomes his earlier doubts, solidifying his heroic identity and ideology by fighting Ra's Al Ghul on a train. Batman purposely engineers damage to the train and the tracks so that the train will crash and explode, killing everyone on board in the process. Ra's Al Ghul nearly defeats Batman, but Bat-man uses the falling train as a diversion to gain the upper hand. Right before the train crashes, Batman says to Ra's Al Ghul, "I won't kill you, but I don't have to save you," and then flies off of the train, leaving Al Ghul to fall to his death (*Batman Begins*).

This situation is almost identical to that presented at the end of *The Dark Knight*, and yet Batman responds to the two scenarios in opposite ways, finally uncovering his

primary motivation as a hero. As Julian Darius points out in *Improving the Foundations: Batman Begins from Comics to Screen,* "Batman saying that he doesn't have to *save* Ra's falls rather flat: Batman has established the conditions that require Ra's life to be saved in the first place" (232). Just as Batman causes the Joker to fall from the skyscraper, he also causes the train crash which ultimately kills Ra's Al Ghul. It could even be argued that because Batman plans the crash of the train before he begins his fight with Ra's Al Ghul, he is *more* responsible for the outcomes of the crash than he is for the Joker's fall, which he uses as a measure of self-defense in the heat of combat. From his parting words to Ra's Al Ghul, it is clear that Batman does not equate a failure to save the villain with actively killing the villain, so even if Batman had decided to allow the Joker to fall, he would not necessarily have violated his one unbreakable rule. There is only one major difference between the two scenes which could cause Batman to respond in opposing ways, and that is the way in which the two villains react to the situation. In both cases, Batman chooses the response which best contradicts the aims of the villain, demonstrating that, in the moments of greatest crisis, his highest value is the ability to block the success of his opponents.

For Ra's Al Ghul, the primary objective is to destroy Gotham. Before Batman leaves Al Ghul to die, he has already prevented this outcome by causing the train to crash before it reaches the central water tower of the city. Al Ghul's secondary goal, however, is to train Bruce Wayne to become a man of action who will actively "do what is necessary." From his first appearance on the screen, Al Ghul establishes that, in his mind, the failure to act is the ultimate sign of weakness. For example, Ra's Al Ghul insists to Bruce that it is his father's own fault that his parents were killed because he failed to prevent their deaths. In his words, "Anger does not change the fact that your father failed to act. . . Training is nothing. Will is everything. The will to act" (*Batman Begins*). Throughout Bruce's training period, Ra's Al Ghul repeats this sentiment, emphasizing that he considers the will to act to be the greatest possible attribute. When Batman finally defeats him in battle and stands over him, ready to strike a death blow, Al Ghul appears pleased, saying, "You have finally learned to do what is necessary" (*Batman Begins*). To Ra's Al Ghul, the active decision to kill is "what is necessary," and even if he loses his life in the process, he gains the satisfaction of knowing that he has trained his pupil to accept the taking of life to combat evil. When Batman responds instead by indicating that he will neither kill nor save his former mentor, he chooses the route of utmost passivity, completely rejecting Ra's Al Ghul's constant emphasis on the value of action.

In contrast, the Joker has established that his main goal is to break apart illusions of civilization and order by corrupting the people of Gotham and, more specifically, the Batman. When he falls off of the ledge, the Joker begins to laugh hysterically, perhaps indicating that for him, this death signifies a final moral victory over the Batman. It isn't until after this satisfied laughter that Batman catches the Joker and pulls him back up to the roof. When Batman saves him, the Joker reaffirms his view, observing that, "You truly are incorruptible, aren't you? Huh? You won't kill me out of some misplaced sense of self-righteousness" (*The Dark Knight*). Although Ra's Al Ghul and the Joker have both committed public acts of destruction and chaos, because of the Joker's response, Batman spares him the kind of retribution he allowed Ra's Al Ghul to receive. According to the Joker, had Batman allowed the Joker to fall, it

would have served as moral corruption in his eyes, and Batman only remains incorruptible because he chooses to save his enemy. Because the Joker *wants* Batman to allow him to fall, Batman has no choice but to save him. When he hears the Joker's laughter, he must do everything in his power to thwart this victory, even if it means allowing the Joker to live.

This moral priority of preventing the Joker from achieving his goals also helps to explain why, after he has just protected his moral integrity by not allowing the Joker to die, Batman sacrifices his standing as a public figure of incorruptibility to protect the image of Harvey Dent. Although the Joker fails to turn Batman, he does manage to corrupt Dent, Gotham's unmasked figure of hope. As he hangs upside down, waiting for the police to capture him, the Joker gloats over his moral prize, claiming that the people of Gotham will only have hope "until their spirit breaks completely—until they get a good look at the real Harvey Dent and all the heroic things *he's* done. You didn't think I'd risk losing the battle for Gotham's soul in a fistfight with you… I took Gotham's white knight and I brought him down to our level" (*The Dark Knight*). Commissioner Gordon agrees with the Joker's assessment, telling Batman, "Every chance you had of fixing our city dies with Harvey's reputation. We bet it all on him. The Joker took the best of us and tore him down. People will lose hope." Batman simply responds to Gordon by saying, "But the Joker cannot win," after which he immediately chooses to take the blame for Harvey's actions (*The Dark Knight*). Because the Joker wants people to lose hope as they see the fall of Harvey Dent, Batman knows that he must sacrifice his own image to protect Harvey. While this decision turns Batman into a despised outlaw, it also completely undermines the Joker's goals, stealing his assumed victory.

If, as these scenarios suggest, Batman primarily works to undermine the villains, then in the context of his role as moral interrogator, he is also able to undermine the value systems which those villains represent. Unlike Batman, who alters his primary objective in response to each individual case, many of Gotham's villains consistently act in accordance with specific value systems. As they take these systems to extremes, they illustrate the potential flaws in those systems—not just only for themselves but also for Gotham, and, by extension, for us as the audience. For example, Ra's Al Ghul insists upon the necessity of justice above all other considerations. It is this dedication to justice that inspires Al Ghul's focus on the will to "do what is necessary." Unwilling to balance justice with mercy, Al Ghul's dedication to justice and only justice eventually leads him to conclude that Gotham's problems require complete extermination rather than rehabilitation. Although Bruce Wayne is initially drawn to this focus on justice, he eventually recognizes its dangers in the extreme forms advocated by Ra's Al Ghul, and he, working as Batman, chooses to combat this ideology rather than embrace it.

While Ra's Al Ghul is the clearest example of twisting a virtue through a lack of balance, several of Gotham's other villains display evidence of similar problems. Dr. Jonathan Crane's scientific obsession with understanding the psychological impact of fear outweighs the humanitarian costs of his work, causing him to join forces with both Carmine Falconi and Ra's Al Ghul to gain funding for his work. After his face burns in a chemical spill, Harvey Dent becomes fixated on what he considers to be "fair." He bases all of his decisions on the flip of a coin, threatening to kill Jim Gordon's innocent son if

the coin demands a negative outcome. In each of these cases, the villains fixate on the extremes of an idea, and Batman works as a balance for these extremes.

In combating these types of villains, Batman does so in part as a symbolic means of rejecting the extremes of the value system which that villain represents. Recognizing the flaws in prizing justice or science or fairness above everything else, Batman removes these un-tempered value systems from Gotham City. Although Batman, like the villains, sometimes takes extreme measures to accomplish his goals, he does so with flexibility in his judgment; unlike the villains, he adjusts to new circumstances, thereby attempting to avoid the dangerous absolutism his opponents espouse. While Batman consistently rejects various systems of values, however, he initially neglects to replace these systems with anything concrete. This is not to say that Batman embraces nihilism as the Joker does; Batman does, at various times, act according to multiple positive virtues, but he does so inconsistently, as though recognizing the difficulty inherent in attempting to adopt moral absolutes in a city of moral complexity and ambiguity. Batman's decision to destroy the values of his opponents reflects a recognition that, in a city like Gotham, rigid adherence to a strict moral code could potentially lead to unwanted outcomes.

Consistently rejecting values without replacing them, Batman becomes a type of moral vacuum or void, and, eventually, this personal code of negation fails when Batman confronts the Joker. Although Batman does resist the Joker's desire to "corrupt" him, his methods cannot completely reject the villain, who does not represent a system of values at all, but rather works as a force of chaos to undermine all societal systems and structures. The Joker stands as a symbol of negation, working to break down all that exists in Gotham City. Even his identity is empty, as his story of origin constantly shifts, and the police are unable to uncover any clues to his background. Because the opposite of the Joker's chaos is concrete moral substance, a complete victory over the Joker is impossible with Batman's approach of negation. No matter how Batman chooses to oppose the Joker, he must accept some negative outcome. Always placing the defeat of villains above other values creates problems because it takes moral philosophy out of Batman's hands and instead defines it negatively against the least moral members of Gotham's society. In this way, Batman loses control over his own moral code, opening the possibility that villains like the Joker can manipulate him into making troubling decisions.

In addition to placing moral authority into the hands of the villains, Batman's oppositional approach to crime also underscores the difficulty of distinguishing "good" characters from the "bad." In traditional superhero tales, the evil of the villains is defined against the goodness of the hero. If Batman defines his morality against each individual villain, then no set standard exists to determine what is good and what is evil, especially since many of Gotham's villains espouse potentially virtuous ideas like justice or fairness. The plots of Nolan's films make clear distinctions between "good guys" and "bad guys," but with Batman's inconsistent values, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact border between villain and hero. As Harvey Dent asserts and Batman later repeats, "You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain" (*The Dark Knight*). As Batman reacts to those he has somehow identified as villains, he sometimes comes dangerously close to their behavior. For example, in response to the Joker, Batman escalates his use of violence, breaking Maroni's legs and beating the unresisting Joker in attempts to gain information. Similarly, he invades all

of Gotham's privacy by intercepting cell phone signals, a move which Lucius Fox questions during the film. Bruce justifies his actions by providing for the eventual destruction of the machine, but only after Batman has established a willingness to push boundaries to deal with his enemies.

The final instance of Batman's troubling behavior comes at the end of the film with his treatment of Harvey Dent's fall from grace. Batman declares that truth is not good enough for the people of Gotham, making the decision to deceive them willfully. For the audience who knows the truth, this lie may seem necessary, as Batman explains that the truth would prove too overwhelming for the frail hope left in the city. He further justifies his decision by claiming, "Sometimes truth isn't good enough. Sometimes, people deserve more. Sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded" (*The Dark Knight*). With this statement, Batman, like the Joker, assumes that only the false absolute of Harvey Dent's image can reward Gotham's faith. By maintaining this falsehood, Batman denies Gotham's citizens the opportunity to build trust in the future, forcing them to rely on a false sense of security rooted in the past.

Through these decisions, Batman, like Iron Man, Rorschach, and other apparent "heroes" of recent comic book adaptations, raises some troubling concerns in his willingness to respond in proportion to increasingly extreme enemies. In popular cinema, as more and more characters like Anton Chigurh (*No Country for Old Men,* 2007) and Hans Landa (*Inglourious Basterds*, 2009), for example, join the Joker in highlighting our inability to fully understand or categorize evolving forms of villainy, apparently heroic responses also become more alienated from conventional morality. While these complex, intriguing villains may initially overshadow critical discussion of the heroes, audiences and critics should also interrogate the actions of their chosen protagonists and consider new ways of differentiating heroes from villains. Because the heroes are flawed, human individuals rather than superhuman exemplars of moral perfection, these new distinctions, rather than being universal or absolute, may vary from hero to hero.

In the closing scenes of *The Dark Knight,* Christopher Nolan recognizes this dilemma. As Commissioner Gordon muses, "[Batman's] the hero Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now... Because he's not a hero. He's a silent guardian. A watchful protector. A dark knight" (*The Dark Knight*). Batman strays from the traditional definition of heroism as he attempts to deal with shifting forms of evil. As a human, he inevitably makes mistakes, and his actions in his position of power must bear scrutiny. In spite of his flaws, however, Batman does represent one characteristic which uniquely identifies him as a hero: he is able to confront the worst face of Gotham without abandoning the city to poverty, crime and despair. It is this faith in Gotham's potential, and not a clearly defined set of moral rules, which allows Batman to distinguish himself from his enemies. Falconi, the Scarecrow, Al Ghul, and the Joker all believe that Gotham is lost. When Harvey Dent loses hope, he, too, morphs from Gotham's white knight into a villain. As we see in Batman's response to the Joker, his belief in Gotham does not always translate into actions which directly protect Gotham's future, but it does allow him to define himself against Gotham's villains more clearly. In the end, only Batman is willing to consistently believe in a brighter future in Gotham. It is this continued hope in the people of his city which sets Nolan's Batman apart as an appropriate, if flawed, hero for a postmodern city like Gotham.

Notes

1. This inclusive approach is similar to the approach sometimes taken with short story cycles, in which multiple short stories "though individually complete and autonomous—are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles" (Dunn and Morris 2). In a short story cycle, each story acts as its own self-contained unit. Shared characters or settings, however, unite multiple stories into a larger, cohesive whole. What differentiates the short story cycle from graphic novels such as the Batman series is that in the case of graphic novels, multiple authors contribute their own individual stories to the whole. Nevertheless, as in the case of short story cycles, each story arc in a set of graphic novels or films about Batman acts as an autonomous unit, connected to other texts in the cycle by "one or more organizing principles."

2. See Crutcher for a more thorough discussion of some unique characteristics of the graphic novel as a medium of storytelling.

3. This characterization of the Joker also bears resemblance to *The Killing Joke,* which provides a personal history for the Joker, only to reveal that it is but one explanation of many to explain the Joker's behavior. At the end of the graphic novel, the Joker undermines the legitimacy of the history presented throughout the story, claiming, "Something like that happened to me, you know. . . . Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another. . . If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!" (Moore).

4. Other recent blockbusters depicting this kind of violent, human superhero include *V for Vendetta* (2005), in which it is unclear how much of V's strength stems from medical experimentation, and *Kick-Ass* (2010). Even the 2011 adaptation of *Thor* removes Thor's superhuman powers for much of the film, forcing him to confront his reliance on violence.

5. Variations on this "trolley dilemma" have long been popular with moral philosophers, and the scenario has become engrained in popular culture. The idiom "throw him under the bus" originates from Thompson's scenario, in which the subject had to choose between pushing a man under a runaway trolley as a means of stopping it or allowing the trolley to kill five innocent bystanders trapped on the tracks. It is important to note that this type of dilemma is forced by nature, making it difficult to impose ethical judgments on the unwilling participants, who become victims of the scenario.

6. This desire to alleviate suffering creates a paradox in which Batman works to prevent suffering, while simultaneously recognizing that it is this suffering which defines him and gives purpose to his existence. In her parting letter to Bruce, Rachel points to this difficulty: "When I told you that if Gotham no longer needed Batman, we could be together, I meant it, but now I'm sure the day won't come when *you* no longer need Batman" (*The Dark Knight*).

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