

# Superheroes and Philosophy

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*Truth, Justice, and the  
Socratic Way*

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## Superhero Revisionism in *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*

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The two graphic novels, *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*, invite us to completely rethink our conception of the superhero, and press us to reconsider some of the fundamental moral principles that have traditionally underwritten our appreciation of superheroes. Just as *Unforgiven* is generally thought of as a “revisionist” western, presenting somewhat familiar themes and characters in a very different light, *The Dark Knight Returns*<sup>1</sup> does a revisionist job by re-inventing two of the oldest comic book superheroes, and *Watchmen*<sup>2</sup> does so by presenting an entirely new superhero world, complete with its own back-story.

These two graphic novels have been enormously influential in terms of how superheroes have been presented and thought of since the mid-to-late 1980s. Many sophisticated elements of comics today that we now take as givens—the way they raise questions of justice and vengeance, their exploration of the ethics of vigilantism, and their depiction of ambivalent and even hostile reactions toward superheroes from the general public as well as from government—are largely traceable to these works. So let’s take a look at some of the more important ways in which they re-conceive the superhero.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Vanley, *The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics/Warner Books, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics/Warner Books, 1986).



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### Crime-Fighters and Vigilantes

In one sense, independent costumed crime-fighters are by definition vigilantes—they take the law into their own hands. In the real world, this is generally regarded as, at best, problematic. For example, the influential British philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) long ago persuasively argued that an important element of the defining conditions of civil society is that each of us gives up his right to private vengeance, delegating it to a legitimately formed government, for the purposes of objective judgment and sentencing.<sup>3</sup> It makes us all more secure, on this theory, to have the pursuit and punishment of wrongdoers be the delegated task of some agency of the state. On this view, it's wrong for me to try to apprehend or punish robbers, as this is the properly assigned function of the state's police force and court system.

Even on this standard account, though, there are exceptions. For example, I may defend myself against an attacker, and I may come to the aid of a third-party suffering an attack. But in most jurisdictions, there are stringent rules and guidelines to which this sort of "private justice" is subject, and among them, typically, is a rule that says I may not go out of my way to look for trouble and then defend against it. In the 1974 movie *Death Wish*, architect Paul Kersey (played by Charles Bronson) clearly defends himself and others against attackers, but the problematic aspect of his behavior is that he goes out at night looking for attackers to neutralize.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the police label him a vigilante. But this is precisely what superheroes do: they don't merely engage in self-defense against imminent threats, they go out looking for the bad guys. In some story lines, of course, the classic superheroes engage in purely defensive action: Galactus comes to destroy Earth, so the Fantastic Four fight back. But more often, superheroes function as a sort of unauthorized police auxiliary unit—Paul Kersey with a mask and, usually, with superpowers. For most of the history of comics, the moral status of this sort of vigilantism wasn't addressed as a serious topic of consideration. We welcomed and applauded our crime-

fighting superiors. We were just glad to see the bad guys get what was coming to them. But this all changed in 1986.

In his 1939 origin story, we learned that Batman was prompted to devote his life to fighting crime by the murder of his parents. As a costumed crime-fighter, he was therefore a vigilante, but he enjoyed close relations with the local authorities, who not only appreciated his help but came to depend on it. Frank Miller's 1986 story about Batman, *The Dark Knight Returns*,<sup>5</sup> explicitly examines the moral issues surrounding superhero vigilantism by re-imagining the Batman's psyche as much more deeply traumatized by his parents' murder. Batman here acknowledges the vigilante nature of the costumed crime-fighter, telling a congressional committee, "Sure we're criminals, we've always been criminals. We have to be criminals."<sup>6</sup> Of course, this is completely accurate only in a technical way, and Batman means it ironically. He breaks some of the laws of Gotham in order to pursue the real criminals who are violating more important laws, and to protect the law-abiding citizens of the city from these thugs and murderers. To the extent that any laws on the books protect criminals and impede the pursuit of justice, Batman will be a lawbreaker.

In Miller's retelling, Batman had once enjoyed a close relationship with the police, but was obliged to "retire" after public anti-vigilante pressure, and when he returns a decade later, he soon finds a new police commissioner issuing a warrant for his arrest. Miller also shows TV talking heads and members of the general public debating the moral status of Batman's vigilantism. Some view him as a dangerous and possibly fascist reactionary, while others see him as true champion of justice. Miller goes so far as to satirize the "expert opinion" emanating from academics by having a leading criminal psychiatrist argue that Batman is actually responsible for the crimes committed by The Joker and Two-Face.

<sup>5</sup> I don't mean to show less than great respect to the artists with whom the writers collaborate to make these *graphic* novels: Miller here collaborates with Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley, and Alan Moore's collaborator on *Watchmen* was Dave Gibbons. Without the visual art, the stories would be far less effective, but inasmuch as my discussion concerns plot, theme, and dialogue, I'll be referring to Miller and Moore.

<sup>6</sup> *The Dark Knight Returns*, Book 3, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> See his *Second Treatise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), Chapter VIII.

<sup>4</sup> His primary motivation is responding to brutal attacks on his wife and daughter, the former of which was fatal.

### Truth, Justice, and the American Way

By way of contrast, Miller has Superman respond to the same social and political pressures that mount against free agent vigilantes by becoming a government operative who works in secret. Miller's Superman understands the resentment that at least partially fuels the anti-superhero movement: "The rest of us recognized the danger—of the endless envy of those not blessed. . . . We must not remind them that giants walk the Earth."<sup>7</sup>

Batman regards Superman as having allowed himself to be co-opted, but Superman sees his decision to work for the government as justified in utilitarian terms, directed to the greater good: "I gave them my obedience and my invisibility. They gave me a license and let us live. No, I don't like it. But I get to save lives—and the media stays quiet."<sup>8</sup> Both recognize that the nature of their distinctive activities makes them "outlaws," regardless of the fact that their motivation is to fight crime and keep innocent people safe. For Superman, this can only mean going to work for the government, more as a soldier in the Cold War than in the War on Crime. Batman's interpretation of this is telling:

You always say yes—to anyone with a badge—or a flag . . . . You sold us out, Clark. You gave them—the *power*—that should have been *ours*. Just like your parents taught you to. My parents taught me a *different* lesson—lying on this street—shaking in deep shock—dying for no reason at all—they showed me that the world only makes sense when you *force* it to.<sup>9</sup>

For Batman, the presence of a badge or a flag is neither necessary nor sufficient for justice. Laws may be unjust, politicians may be corrupt, and the legal system may actually protect the wicked, but none of this will deter Batman from his mission. The crime-fighting vigilante superhero does not let anything stand between him and the attainment of what he sees as real justice. Why should well-meaning social structures be allowed to stand in the way of what is objectively right?

This can all seem to make some degree of sense, provided that the vigilante is in fact doing good, but it would be far more troubling if vigilantes lack a clear perception of right and wrong. For example, the return of the Batman inspires some members of a large and powerful street gang that he vanquishes to themselves become crime-fighting vigilantes—the "Sons of the Batman"—but they kill, and they main far more indiscriminately than their namesake ever would. Indeed, Batman has always carefully avoided killing his adversaries, preferring to deliver apprehended criminals to the police alive, if somewhat damaged. He comes to regret this for the first time only toward the end of the story, when it occurs to him that by not killing the Joker long ago, there is a sense in which he bears some responsibility for the hundreds of people the Joker subsequently murdered.

Despite Batman's willingness to break rules, he has always been cautious and measured in his use of violence, he has refused to cross certain lines, and he has consistently interfered with and apprehended only criminals. His customary use of physical violence in the service of basic justice can come to seem appropriate to the context of the sociopathic street gangs and homicidal masterminds in which he finds himself, and while this may be at some level immensely disquieting, it raises the question of who is the more honest—the vigilante who understands the trade-off necessary for the protection of the innocent in such circumstances, or those vocal critics of the superhero who deplore the methods of social protection on which they themselves have come to depend.

### A Whole New World

By bringing into clearer view the reality of the ethical dimensions of vigilantism, and by exploring the underlying psychological context within which superheroes operate, Miller's story forces us to rethink our understanding of Batman and Superman, and thus to re-examine our related notions of right and wrong.

Alan Moore's original single-issue series, and now prominent graphic novel, *Watchmen*<sup>10</sup> also leads us to rethink our funda-

<sup>7</sup> *The Dark Knight Returns*, Book 3, pp. 16–26.

<sup>8</sup> *The Dark Knight Returns*, Book 3, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> *The Dark Knight Returns*, Book 4, pp. 38–40.

<sup>10</sup> See Note 5 above.

mental moral ideas and our attitudes toward the concept of a superhero, but it does so through a more wholesale re-imagining of the world of superheroes. In this case, we are given a critical distance on the phenomenon by being presented with a different fictional world. It's not the DC Comics world of Batman, Superman, Green Arrow, and the rest of the Justice League, and neither is it the Marvel Comics world of Spider-Man, X-Men, and the Fantastic Four—Moore creates an entirely new and different collection of masked crime-fighters, along with one clearly superhuman superhero. The world of Moore's story begins by asking the question of what would happen if the 1938 release of the first "Superman" comic book story had inspired some real people to become masked crime-fighters. He then recapitulates comic book history by inventing a "golden age" collection of superheroes and various costumed vigilantes, as well as a later generation following in their footsteps. The narrative of *Watchmen* uses them to delve into the psychology as well as the ethical and political ramifications of vigilantism.

One way that *Watchmen* forces us to rethink the superhero is by portraying several costumed crime-fighters as at least to some extent psychologically troubled. Moore's character Rorschach, for example, has been traumatized by an abusive childhood, and is in many ways emotionally and psychologically maladjusted. He is absolutely ruthless in his willingness to use violence to fight crime, yet his commitment to justice seems real and uncompromising. While the earlier generation of Moore's superheroes was inspired by the "Superman" comic book character, Rorschach was spurred into action by another event from the real world: the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese. Newspaper accounts of the time were unsparing in their revelation that thirty-eight witnesses had watched and had done nothing while she was being stabbed to death in an urban public space.<sup>11</sup>

In the real world, the advent of the Superman comics did not bring about a wave of masked crime-fighters, and neither did the murder of Kitty Genovese. But in *Watchmen*, the reports of this murder made the man who became Rorschach "ashamed for humanity," and inspired him to don a grotesque ink-blot mask,

<sup>11</sup> Martin Gansburg, "Thirty-Eight Who Saw Murder Didn't Call Police," *New York Times* (March 27th, 1964).

"a face that I could bear to look at in the mirror,"<sup>12</sup> and go out to fight crime. One thing that is a bit disquieting about Moore's retelling of the story is that the presumably "normal" people who actually witnessed the famous murder did nothing, but the one person who took action because of it, launching in response a life-long campaign against crime, is an individual any of us would consider a deeply damaged and disturbed man.

Unlike Superman and Spider-Man, neither Rorschach nor Batman possesses any superpowers. Yet they choose to devote their lives to fighting crime. Are they "revenge-driven psychopaths," or should any of us who recoil from them be considered like the ordinary monsters from Kitty Genovese's neighborhood, whose complicity in horror consists in utter inaction? Or could both these things be true? One of Moore's epigraphs is the famous aphorism penned by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you."<sup>13</sup> Has Rorschach (or Batman) failed to heed this advice? Or is it the rest of us who are too conservative, too frightened, or too weak to take a noble risk and engage the monsters?

The superhero's most fundamental attitude seems to be that, contrary to Locke, it's everyone's right, if not duty, to fight crime, and to do whatever we can to seek justice for ourselves and for our communities. Spider-Man famously realized that "with great power comes great responsibility,"<sup>14</sup> but Rorschach shows us that the "power" to fight crime is largely a matter of will, or choice, which seems to create a greater responsibility for all of us.

### Look On My Works, Ye Mighty

Some of Moore's other characters are more psychologically stable than Rorschach. Both the original Nite Owl and his successor seem entirely sane and emotionally well adjusted in at least most respects, sincerely motivated by a desire to help others,

<sup>12</sup> *Watchmen*, Chapter VI, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Epigraph to *Watchmen*, Chapter VI; from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 89.

<sup>14</sup> Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *Amazing Fantasy* #15, 1962.

and convinced that they can make a difference. But even the current Nite Owl has his secrets, and perhaps private fetishes tied up with his costuming. Most of the costumed crime-fighters in *Watchmen* seem to be psychologically unhealthy in one way or another. The Comedian is thuggish and sadistic. The super-powered Doctor Manhattan is so detached from the human world as to be emotionally uncomprehending. They all seem as inclined to argue with each other as to pursue criminals. And Ozymandias, the man who is by far the most intelligent of the merely human vigilantes, as well as being immensely successful by normal worldly standards, is a clearly megalomaniacal individual, taking no less than Alexander the Great as his personal role model.

Ozymandias is a particularly interesting case. He accurately predicts that the world is moving toward nuclear holocaust, and then both creates and successfully executes an elaborate plan to stop this likely annihilation of all life. Using the talents of some of the most creative people on the planet, whom he kills when their work is complete to keep it secret, he sets up a fake alien intrusion into New York City involving an explosion that he knows will kill millions of people. His expectation is that the sudden appearance of an alien foe threatening human life will bring together all the otherwise warring nations in peaceful collaboration against this new common enemy. Before they can ever conclude that there is no more of a threat from beyond forthcoming, new habits of harmonious co-operation will have changed the face of the Earth into a peaceful environment that subsequently will support human fulfillment and happiness.

The plan hatched by Ozymandias succeeds, at the expense of three million lives. Is he insane? Is he evil? On the one hand, he was able to analyze accurately a growing threat of nuclear war, sparked and exacerbated by international gamesmanship. And the drastic solution he concocts to save the world and restore peace seems to be successful. Yet, that solution is in itself utterly repellent, since it entails intentionally killing millions of people and deceiving all the others still living. Can the end justify the means?

To the way of thinking employed by Ozymandias, the deaths of even many more people could be justified in the name of saving billions of other lives and ending war between nations. If

this brings about the "stronger, loving world" he intends, then he is completely convinced it is the right thing to do. Is his action just tremendously effective? Or is it utterly mad? Is it sadly necessary? Or is it irredeemably evil? We can't avoid confronting the issues. And these questions lead us back to our understanding of superheroes.

Ironically, the arch-villain in Moore's story turns out to be one of its brightly costumed public heroes, and even more ironically, it is precisely the one who is by far the most popular with the general public, Ozymandias. This erstwhile hero arrogantly explains to his shocked vigilante peers, after his horrific deed has been accomplished, that their greatest achievement as heroes has been their failure to stop him from saving the planet. They immediately want to tell the world the truth about what he has done. But he reasons with them that if they do, they will eliminate the one benefit that could have justified all the deaths, and they will make the situation as a result much worse.

The most serious moral judgment on all the rest of the costumed crime-fighters then comes in their acquiescing to his argument and agreeing to remain complicit in the secret of what has transpired, in order not to disrupt the fragile peace that it has accomplished. The only one of them with superpowers, and yet the one of them utterly devoid of human feelings, Dr. Manhattan, even seems persuaded by the overall logic Ozymandias has used to justify his actions, and a short time later leaves the Earth, apparently satisfied with the resulting state of things. The only person who will not be co-opted and refuses to keep silent about the scheme is Rorschach. He rejects the utilitarian reasoning applied in this way, with its implication that it can be right to inflict such widespread pain, suffering, and death on innocent people so that a greater good might possibly result. He vows to tell the world the whole truth about what has just happened and, before he is killed by Dr. Manhattan to ensure his silence, he exclaims: "Never compromise. . . . Evil must be punished."<sup>15</sup>

The questions that force themselves on us are not just whether Ozymandias has gone insane, or has descended into evil, or both. We are forced to ask whether anyone in his position could ever be right in doing something like he did. We are

<sup>15</sup> *Watchmen*, Chapter XII, pp. 20–23.

then necessarily confronted with the further question of whether we who absolutely recoil from such an action could in any way ourselves be blameworthy for being too weak to do whatever might be necessary to save the planet. This cluster of questions can be asked in different ways. Has this man, this intelligent and popular superhero, “become a monster,”<sup>16</sup> or is he just a misunderstood savior? Is the scrappy and scruffy Rorschach being stubborn, due to his obsessive fixation with what he considers to be justice, or is he right to reject the utilitarian ethic that has been used to rationalize the murder of millions? Moore’s requiring us to take up these questions, like Miller’s questions about the nature of vigilantism, forces us to confront fundamental issues of ethics, law, and psychology in considering how we regard superheroes, and then ultimately in considering how we regard ourselves in our own roles in the world.

### Rethinking the Superhero Concept

There are many important ways in which we can be led by *Watchmen* to rethink the superhero concept: Could anyone ever be trusted to occupy the position of a watchman over the world? In the effort “to save the world,” or most of the world, could a person in the position of a superhero be tempted to do what is in itself actually and deeply evil, so that good may result? Is the Olympian perspective, whereby a person places himself above all others as a judge concerning how and whether they should live, a good and sensible perspective for initiating action in a world of uncertainty? That is to say, could anyone whose power, knowledge, and position might incline them to be grandiosely concerned about “the world” be trusted to do the right thing for individuals in the world? Or is the savior mindset inherently dangerous for any human being to adopt?

In many panels that snake through sections of *Watchmen*, there is a strange parallel story about a man lost at sea who is intent on enacting revenge against the pirates he holds responsible for the destruction of his ship and the deaths of his shipmates. The story is conveyed in the panels of a comic book being read by a young man sitting near a newsstand in New York as the greater action of the real story plays out around him.

<sup>16</sup> He did literally create a monster.

The connection between this bizarre and grotesque pirate tale and the main narrative of the novel is never made explicitly clear by the author, but one point of contact is obvious. The “hero” of the seafaring yarn, in his attempts to see that justice is done, runs squarely into what is often called “the law of unintended consequences” and ends up committing horrendous evil, to his own surprise, and against the very people he was aiming to help, or at least avenge. The knowledge that he thought was sufficient to guide him as he sought his own justice outside the law ended up being a tissue of fantasy and falsehood, and it led to tragedy. One of the main dangers faced by any superhero would consist in just that—the limitations of any perspective in an immensely complex world, the potential inaccuracy of even the most carefully formed beliefs, and the law of unintended consequences could easily doom rogue vigilante efforts to the perpetration of tremendous harm rather than the attainment of cosmic justice, and thus undermine the whole concept of the superhero.

Questioning the concept of the superhero ultimately involves questioning ourselves. And the main question is not whether we as ordinary people would be prepared to do what a superhero might have to do under the most extraordinary circumstances, but rather whether we are in fact prepared to do whatever we can do in ordinary ways to make the world such that it doesn’t require extraordinary salvation from a superhero acting outside the bounds of what we might otherwise think is morally acceptable. Against the backdrop of some bleak and nihilistic statements about meaning in the universe and in life, Alan Moore seems to be making the classic existentialist move of throwing the responsibility of meaning and justice onto us all, and showing us what can result if we abdicate that responsibility, leaving it to a few, or to any one person who would usurp the right to decide for the rest of us how we are to be protected and kept safe. Whatever we make of the nihilism, we can take the lesson to heart. If normal human beings had been doing what they should be doing, in normal human ways, a person like Ozymandias most likely would never have gotten into a position where he could reasonably come to believe that he had to take drastic action to save us from ourselves. We would have been doing that all along.

### Who Watches the Watchmen?

An interesting commonality of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* is that, in both stories, public sentiment has turned against the superheroes, and their activities are explicitly criminalized, unless they officially work for the government. Like Miller's Superman, Moore's Doctor Manhattan and The Comedian are co-opted by the state, allowed to function as paramilitary government operatives, and the rest are forced into retirement (if they hadn't quit already), except for the criminal dwelling Rorschach, who continued to terrorize the criminal underworld but because of that became himself a wanted criminal. Whether emotionally disturbed or not, the costumed crime-fighters had chosen to help people, yet the prevailing public sentiment became antagonistic. The referent of Moore's title, and a common graffiti slogan in the New York of his story, is a famous line from the ancient writer Juvenal (*ca.* 55–*ca.* 130), “Who Watches the Watchmen?”<sup>17</sup> The costumed crime-fighters—the “superheroes” here—are in one sense protecting the people from themselves, as The Comedian notes, and in turn the people don't trust them.<sup>18</sup> Is the resentment of the general populace based on fear, as The Comedian suggests, or is their animosity based on the envy suggested by Superman in *The Dark Knight Returns*? Or could it be based on guilt?

One further question is raised by both these stories: would we have more to fear from costumed superheroes operating as vigilante crime-fighters outside officially sanctioned authority, or as covert operatives of the government? Part of the significance of this superhero revisionism is in the way it makes us think about the nature of authority, just as it makes us think about the ethics of vigilantism and the relationship between law and morality. Certainly a criminal has more to fear from Rorschach or Batman than from Doctor Manhattan or Superman, although political enemies of the United States would need to be more fearful of the latter.

One colloquial argument against vigilantism is sometimes invoked against government power itself: how do you know

you're right? Batman harms only wrongdoers, but the Sons of the Batman are less well grounded in both detective skills and ethics. Nevertheless, the U.S. Government orders Superman to put a stop to Batman's activities. Doctor Manhattan kills Rorschach. The question of who watches the watchmen is of course an issue in political theory, not just a question about costumed crime-fighters. But if earlier generations first came to understand ethics, law and order, and political authority by way of the older portrayals of superheroes, the superhero revisionism in the works of Moore and Miller forces us also to rethink our ethics, our roles in the broader world, and our views about law and social order. Moore and Miller are asking us to look into the abyss, and then to use it as a mirror for seeing ourselves more clearly.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> “Quis custodiet ipsos custodites,” Juvenal, *Satires*, VI, 347

<sup>18</sup> The Comedian makes this observation to Nite Owl while pacifying mass riots during the police strike. *Watchmen*, Chapter II, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to Tom Morris for many helpful suggestions.