How do Superheroes Problematise Morality?

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To What Extent do Superheroes Problematise the Role of Morality in the Pursuit of Eutopia? Discuss with Reference to One Example.

Everyone knows how the genre works. A person is endowed with superhuman abilities (either due to an accident or due to their own resources), suffers a personal tragedy of some sort and decides to dedicate their lives to the protection and wellbeing of the community. Granted, the sequence of events may not always be that predictable – tragedy can, for instance, pre-empt the presence of superpowers – but the end result is always the same: a lone individual fighting for the 'greater good' while pitted against those who are 'evil'. In other words, the superhero becomes a eutopian manifestation, as someone who corrects the flaws in society through radical change.

The problem with this formulaic approach to eutopia is that it hinges on one key factor – the inherent goodness of the superhero in question. After all, what would happen if Peter Parker decided to use his powers for selfish gain or, even worse, to overpower and rule over others? As C. Stephen Layman so aptly summarises it in the title of his essay, 'Why Be a Superhero? Why Be Moral?' (Layman, 2005: p. 194). This essay will look deeper at that very question and highlight the problems it inevitably brings up.

Before embarking on this analysis, a caveat is necessary to explain the choice of superhero being used here, namely Spider-Man. The basic premise of his story is simple: teenager Peter Parker is bestowed superhuman, spider-like abilities due to a bite from a radioactive spider. When he refuses to stop a robber with his new-found powers, the same robber kills his uncle Ben. Guilt-ridden, Peter adopts the persona of Spider-Man and starts to fight crime (Lee, 1962). The details of the plot change according to the various iterations, but the basics remain the same (with some exceptions highlighted later in the essay). The two main reasons for selecting Spider-Man instead of other superheroes are the range of incarnations available and Peter Parker's position in society. The former allows for a more in-depth look at morality by allowing comparisons within what is essentially the same story. The latter is significant because Peter is the mainstream superhero who is closest to being an 'ordinary' person. This is opposed to Superman, who is an alien, Batman, whose economic standing places him in a unique position, and the X-Men, who spend their lives isolated amongst other superhumans, interacting with the world only when they save it. Peter, by comparison, is a regular teenager who, crucially, continues to be a part of society and function as a 'regular' human being even after gaining his powers. Thus, he is the most realistic superhero in that anyone can pursue his eutopian goals (if the scientific explanation of the spider-bite can be rationalised of course) without having to be born or raised in unique circumstances. (While a minor point, it should be noted that this essay will refer to the superhero protagonist as 'Spider-Man' and 'Peter' or 'Peter Parker' interchangeably; there is no significance in the choice of name at any given point beyond personal and artistic preference, unless specifically stated.)

Having justified the choice of superhero, we can now delve into the issue itself; namely, how problematic is the superhero's reliance on morality? The crux of this question is considering why a superhero chooses to help others in the first place. If we are to look at this using political thought, there are two main ways to go about it. The utilitarian argument would be that Spider-Man uses his abilities for a good cause because that provides the greatest overall happiness (Robichaud, 2005: p. 179). As an extension of this position, we can reasonably suggest that by making society safer, Peter is not only helping others but he is also helping himself by keeping his friends and family safe (Evans, 2005: pp. 165-166). A good example of this argument is near the final scene in the first *Spider-Man* film. The

antagonist, Green Goblin, forces Spider-Man to choose between saving his long-time love interest Mary Jane Watson and a cable car full of children. By using his superpowers in the best way possible, Spider-Man achieves the optimum outcome and saves both Mary Jane and the children. He chooses the option which results in the greatest possible benefit (Raimi, 2002). This is an objective, rational approach whereby the success of a choice is determined by its outcome. By focussing on the consequences of the action, rather than the motivation behind it, utilitarianism manages to somewhat deproblematise the issue of morality. Spider-Man's moral standing is not in the result after all; it is in his choice to act in the first place.

However, the situation is not that simple. After all, if Spider-Man weighed all his actions, he would have known to avoid attacking a car thief head-on because his actions ended up disrupting the police's efforts to provide security in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Webb, 2012). Even looking at the previous dilemma provided by the Green Goblin, Spider-Man would have chosen to jump after the cable car first and Mary Jane second (instead of saving her first as he did in the film) in case he was unable to complete both tasks, as that would result in fewer losses of life (Raimi, 2002). While he may use his superpowers in a utilitarian way to have the maximum effect, Spider-Man's actions are driven by the desire to do good, making it more akin to a non-consequentialist or a Kantian approach (Robichaud, 2005: p. 185). This also exempts him from blame in stopping the car thief in *The Amazing Spider-Man*; his actions might have resulted in problems for the police (who in this film were portrayed as 'good', as opposed to the corrupt portrayals in other superhero films) but his intentions were pure, which makes the action itself a good one. This, of course, raises the issue of morality once again because if Peter Parker was not a 'good' person, his motivations for using his superpowers would be immoral and, therefore, the actual use of his powers would also be immoral.

This, unfortunately, brings us back to the heart of the problem without really shedding any helpful light on it. We can perhaps understand *why* Spider-Man acts the way he does but it still hinges on him being morally sound. Unlike professionals who help others due to the monetary benefits (such as doctors or lawyers) and unlike people with direct emotional links to those they help (such as a mother cooking food for her children), Spider-Man usually helps strangers, though some situations result in him needing to save those he personally cares about (Keeping, 2012: p. 70). As far as his origin story is concerned, there is a deterministic element to his motivations. In the original comic series, some new incarnations like *Ultimate Spider-Man* (Bendis, 2000-2011), and the Sam Raimi films, Peter initially uses his abilities for personal profit by becoming a professional wrestler. The wrestling promoter cheats him out of his wages; subsequently, he refuses to stop a thief who steals the promoter's money. In the Marc Webb film, Peter refuses to help a grocery store clerk stop a thief because he had been forbidden from exchanging money from the tip jar earlier on. In all cases, on his way back home, he finds out that his uncle, who was out looking for him, did try to stop the thief, as a result of which he was shot and killed. Guilt-ridden over his inaction and inspired by the morality his uncle had always practiced, Peter chooses to become Spider-Man. Thus, his origin story places a pre-fated morality on him (Brenzel, 2005: pp. 152-154).

Comparisons to alternative versions of Spider-Man further highlight this pre-determined morality. In the crossover series *House of M*, Peter's uncle is not killed but he is still bitten by the spider and subsequently chooses to fight crime because of the fame and fortune it brings him. In this particular case, he does not attempt to hide his identity either, basking in his superheroic aura as a central part of his existence rather than as an alter-ego (Bendis, 2005). In this instance, morality is made irrelevant but only by replacing it with another dilemma, that of a selfish incentive. Therefore, the problematic nature of morality is not solved, only substituted for another issue.

Another iteration of Spider-Man is the *What If…?* series of comics. In *What If…? Vol. 1, No. 7*, three parallel storylines see three characters other than Peter Parker suffer from the radioactive spider-bite and become Spider-Man. In all three cases, the individuals fail to stop crime and, in two cases, they are actually killed. The reason for their failure is because they have selfish motivations behind their crime-fighting attempts (Glut, 1978). This shows that morality is a key factor in determining the nature of the superheroic actions. In Peter Parker's case, his moral code results in a successful implementation of eutopia, or, at the very least, a drop in crime rates. In his absence and in the absence of his morality, Spider-Man fails to live up to his potential and cannot be harnessed as a force for change.

We can make use of two further and diametrically opposite examples. In *What If…? Vol. 1, No. 19*, Peter Parker

gains his superpowers but refuses to actively use them for any purpose, good or bad (Gillis, 1980). This is due to a lack of moral imperative that makes him fulfil his eutopian potential. Comparatively, in *Powerless*, he remains an ordinary teenager, because the spider never bites him, but he still tries to fight crime and is mortally wounded in the process (Cherniss and Johnson, 2004). In this case, the moral impetus is present – in this particular instance, it is the way he is raised by his uncle and aunt as a 'good' person – but the superpower potential is absent. This shows that morality is necessary in the pursuit of enacting change, regardless of the actual potential to do so.

The common thread running through all of these versions of Spider-Man is the issue of morality, or, more specifically, of moral luck. The argument in each case is that, regardless of the abilities of the individual (in this case, Spider-Man), the key factor in determining whether they can enact any type of change is their moral standing. It therefore requires a convenient situation where the protagonist has both the superheroic capabilities and the moral drive to attempt following a eutopian vision (Tallon, 2012: pp. 92-93).

If we go further back into Peter's back-story, we get a sense of how this morality came to be. He is a good person because his uncle and aunt raised him as such (Layman, 2005: p. 194). As shown in the films, especially in*The Amazing Spider-Man* (Webb, 2012), his uncle in particular embeds a deep sense of responsibility in him. When he forgets to meet his aunt at the train station, his uncle is furious at him, not only because of the fact that she had to walk back home alone in a crime-ridden New York, but mostly because Peter reneged on a promise, albeit unintentionally. Or, as is seen in the now-iconic scene in *Spider-Man*, his uncle tells him, without being aware of Peter's superheroic potential, 'With great power comes great responsibility' (Raimi, 2002). While this provides a heart-warming plot point in both the comics and the films, it is not particularly reassuring in the practical implications of Spider-Man as a utopian parable. If Spider-Man really is a blueprint – or, at least, a parallel – for utopian social change, then hope only lies with those who are fortunate enough to be raised as morally sound individuals.

To create a more coherent link between the larger utopian discourse and Spider-Man, we can compare Spider-Man's superpowers to Tom Moylan's theory of critical mass. This essentially states that there is a tipping point where a significant number of people can harness utopian thoughts into action (Moylan, 1986). Spider-Man's superpowers can be likened to this critical mass of people. If we therefore unequivocally state that his actions are in pursuit of a eutopia, we can see that the question of morality is indeed a problematic issue in utopianism. Utopian literature and utopian experiments are all based on the fact that the people portrayed or involved have the desire for radical, positive change. In the Spider-Man universe, this is complicated by juxtaposing the moral, eutopian protagonist against the more ambiguous populace at large and, more specifically, against the immoral super-villains. Spider-Man (as well as the police force, though they are largely in the background) fights to protect society. But this does not apply to society itself. In *Spider-Man 2*, Peter stops his superheroic endeavours at one point when it becomes too problematic for his personal life. The result is not someone else taking up his mantle, or society continuing to function crime-free in the now-defunct Spider-Man's memory; instead, crime rates actually shoot up by 75 per cent (Raimi, 2004). The moral watchdog is needed for society to transcend its base immorality and become eutopian.

The super-villains are more obvious examples of the need for Spider-Man's interference. While the general populace functions as any dysfunctional contemporary metropolis does, Spider-Man's enemies are all endowed with superpowers similar to the protagonist. These range from the biological mutations of the Lizard and Venom, to the advanced armour and weaponry of the Green Goblin and Electro. Like the myth of Gyges in ancient Greece (where Gyges is gifted an all-powerful ring which he then uses for personal gain), Spider-Man's villains are all driven by selfish immorality (Brenzel, 2005: p. 148). They represent the opposite end of the utopian spectrum with regards to superpowered individuals – not the eutopian superhero, but the dystopian super-villain. This is a truly worrying prospect because the implication is that if morality is not present, people might use their critical mass for the wrong kind of utopian vision.

At the end of this discussion on the problems of morality as a feature in superheroic utopias, there is a sense of doubt as to why superheroes carry such mass appeal in the first place. The Comics Code, although now out of date, explicitly stated that 'In every instance, good shall triumph over evil' because of the audience demand for that ending (Brenzel, 2005: p. 149). Why, though, given the fact that superheroes can only be successful by being on the moral high ground? Why is there no similar appeal for stories where heroes use their powers for selfish reasons, which,

realistically, is what many people might do in similar circumstances? Perhaps it is because this complexity and conflict is central to human nature, and superheroes are an artistic expression of that very nature (Brenzel, 2005: p. 149). And perhaps the final conclusion that can be drawn from this discussion is not necessarily a solution to the problem of morality but the fact that human nature has an inherently utopian impulse in spite of the problem.

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