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Superheroes: The Philosophy Behind the Modern Myth

Masters' Diploma Thesis

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently,
using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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Author's signature

I want to thank Mr. Pospíšil for his valuable advice during writing of this thesis.

A big thank you also goes to my friends who were kind enough to read the work, challenge my claims, and point out flaws in my argumentation.

Last but not least, thanks to all the superheroes for keeping us safe over the years.

Fezzik: Why are you wearing a mask? Were you burned by acid or something like that?
The Man in Black: Oh, no, it's just they're terribly comfortable, I think everyone will be wearing them in the future.

- *The Princess Bride* (1987)

Beneath this mask there is more than flesh... beneath this mask there is an idea, Mr. Creedy... and ideas are bulletproof.

- *V for Vendetta* (2006)

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2. The Philosophy Behind the Superhero Narratives

The common assumption for the comics medium would be that it is only slapstick, merely entertaining readers with hijinks, fantastic and incredible situations, and use of direct speech instead of prose. The main aim is therefore right there in the medium's name – they are *comic* books. Comic implies that they are primarily about entertainment through humour. Is it therefore productive to analyse superhero narratives in order to understand their possible underlying philosophy? What deeper meaning can there be to discover? Comic books are here chiefly to entertain and based on their popularity they are apparently doing a good job, so why complicate it with analysing them from any philosophical point of view? Well, because the entertainment is not the only value these stories possess. Also, that some titles lack the layer of a philosophical context does not mean that other titles do as well: this thesis will show that this r*eductio ad absurdum* is not a concern.

While this work will continue to use the established and generally accepted term *comic books* as an adequate term for the traditional means of distribution of the superhero narratives, it is worthwhile to address this basic distinction between the different forms of graphic storytelling. Superhero narratives in comic books began as trivial and simplistic but now have evolved into a sophisticated literary genre of their own, worthy of critical interest. Like Greek and Roman mythologies those of superheroes offer a similar scope of important issues to reflect. "As literary constructs go, they don't need to be terribly complex; in their primary-colored costumes, fighting gaudy villains and hyperdramatic menaces that aren't terribly subtle, they're intended to excite the imagination of children with the same fire and energy as the myths and fairy tales of years past." (Waid 277)

It is important to address what is referred to in this text as a comic book. For example although a character in the same medium *Garfield* comics resist the same philosophical analysis that reveals greater depths to superhero comics. Comic books represent a broad range of publications

and to place superhero narratives in the same context as *Garfield* would be shortsighted because: (1) the three panel format of *Garfield* limits the narrative's complexity; (2) being published in newspapers *Garfield* is intended to be easily accessible comedy. Conversely, superhero narratives are published for a select audience so they have more independence for the story and characters to develop. "Archie and Garfield are 'comic,' the Batman and Spider-Man are comparatively more serious and are involved in serialized fictional stories, not series of gags." (Tate 4423) This is enough to assume that analysing *Garfield* in the same way as this work analyses superhero narratives is unlikely to reveal any more about the society we live in other than that we are biased against Mondays.

It needs to be recognised that superhero comic books, in addition to being an enjoyable read, deal with a wide scope of themes. In the introduction to *Superheroes and Philosophy* the collective of authors lists the issues that modern comic books address:

> The best superhero comics, in addition to being tremendously entertaining, introduce and treat in vivid ways some of the most interesting and important questions facing all human beings – questions regarding ethics, personal and social responsibility, justice, crime and punishment, the mind and human emotions, personal identity, the soul, the notion of destiny, the meaning of our lives, how we think about science and nature, the role of faith in the rough and tumble of this world, the importance of friendship, what love really means, the nature of a family, the classic virtues like courage, and many other important issues. (Morris 200)

The word *vivid* needs to be stressed here: unlike classical philosophical writings superhero stories take full advantage of the visual power of the relatively new medium that is comics. Like movies they use visual imagery to tell stories that resonate strongly with the audience but at the same time, like novels they better allow readers to make their own conclusions and interpretations and pace the stories with accordance to their needs. They take the best from both worlds and combine literary

and visual art into a unique blend that has become defining for comics as a medium. But most importantly, although resting heavily on the shoulders of the philosophical titans of the past, unlike Plato, Mill, Bentham or Kant, comic books are being read outside academic soil by children and adults alike. This fact alone makes them considerably influential works of art.

Superheroes have one more obvious advantage over the classic philosophers – they are contemporary. Although the existential, moral or societal issues remain just as topical as they were in the days of Socrates, some things did change. An important aspect of superhero stories that makes them highly relevant for readers is that they depict a fictional world that very closely mirrors our own:

> Unlike their cousins in fantasy and science fiction stories, superheroes live in a world that is familiar to readers. The same societal institutions–police departments, schools and churches–are found in comic books as in real life, along with the same historical timeline and events–World War II, the Civil Rights movement, and space exploration. (Peterson 310)

In the context of modern science such as nanotechnologies, genetic research or advanced weaponry;[3] and in the context of the elementary superhero plot – finding yourself one day with amazing powers and facing the decision what to do with them – these stories put traditional philosophical reasonings to new tests and make them topical and more relevant for the modern reader.

The perception of what is humanly possible changes over time. Hypothetically, a nineteenth century concept of a super-power might be the ability to move at the speed of 100 km/h or cross the ocean in the matter of hours but now anyone can own a car and travel by trans-oceanic flights. Even contemporary common ability to read the lines of this text would put a person among the literary elite only 500 years ago. Our perception of what is common and what is extraordinary

[3] Coincidentally, the U.S. president Barrack Obama recently announced, albeit with open exaggeration, that the military is working on their own version of the Iron Man suit. (Reuters)

changes in time. Naturally many things are available to us only through science and technology. This is where the fictional characters of superheroes most deviate from reality – they take the latest scientific concepts and attribute them directly to people as an integral part of their character. The same amazing abilities, many of which already exist in one form or another in the contemporary world, gain personal level in superhero narratives and are consequently dealt with in a spectacularly flashy, yet subtly familiar and alarming way to the reader. This is one noteworthy factor behind the allure of the whole genre.

Although Batman is unlikely to replace Aristotle as an archetype for a great thinker for the time being, superhero stories may help us to better understand classical philosophers. Philosophy is an abstract subject and thinkers learned long ago to use narratives in order to illustrate their point. Fundamentally, there is no difference between a modern superhero narrative and the story of the Ring of Gyges used as an exemplification in *The Republic* by Plato. "People tend to learn better when something unfamiliar, such as philosophy, is explained in terms of something familiar, such as television, movies, comic books, music, or videogames." (Irwin 273) The starting point for this work is that superheroes are here and they have a message. The questions that this thesis attempts to answer is what that message is and what wisdom can be unearthed in their stories.

2.1 The Function of Myth. Thinking of Superheroes as Modern Mythology

The words *myth* or *mythology* are usually associated with ancient societies of the past and have no imminent or obvious impact on the human society at the present. One of the arguments behind this thesis is that modern-day superhero stories of popular culture serve the same or similar purpose as the ancient myths, bear similar characteristics, stimulate imagination and arouse interest in the same areas of human thought.

There are numerous heroic figures throughout literary and mythological history that serve as paragons of not only physical strength but of moral authority as well. They are particularly

symptomatic for Greco-Roman and Norse mythologies. The individual narratives in a particular culture, the sum of which forms the basis for that culture's mythology, had been devised not only for the purpose of entertainment but they had important social functions as well. In the contemporary modern form story-telling has become fully separated from its religious origin and attained the status of a social device:

> A culture's prominent narratives become that culture's myths, reinforcing cultural values and disseminating norms of social behaviour. […] modern myths need not be founded upon religious ideologies; rather, such myths develop from ethical perspectives as they relate to a political and economical world. (Reynolds 105)

Superhero stories represent the modern-day parallel to ancient mythologies; as a result of their constant popularity across several decades superhero narratives are an inextricable part of the popular culture and as such they provide us with an insight into moral values of society and an image of ideals to which we aspire.

Don LoCicero in *Superheroes and Gods: A Comparative Study from Babylonia to Batman* compares the characteristics of mythological heroes from numerous ancient societies with those of the contemporary superheroes, namely Persian Rustam, Babylonian Gilgamesh, Indian Rama, Egyptian Osiris, Finnish Väinämöinen and many more.

> Superman, Captain Marvel, Wonder Woman, James Bond – these and other larger-than-life figures are the counterparts of the classic superheroes of the past. While they may differ from the latter in that science, rather than the gods, provided them with their extraordinary gifts […] Indeed, Achilles and Superman, Rustam and Captain Marvel, the Hulk and the Frankenstein being, Odysseus and James Bond – all are essentially blood brothers [and share the essence from the same wellspring of motifs.] (LoCicero 70)

As an example we can draw a parallel between two prominent well-known ancient mythological heroes and two selected representatives of the superhero genre by pointing out their significant character traits that make them pose as role models.

The first example of the mythological character is Heracles: he is known as both the greatest and the strongest of the Greek heroes, possessing powers of supernatural origin and having the status of a demigod by having a divine father and a human mother. As such, Heracles is to be understood as an epitome for strength, physical prowess but due to his kindness also humility towards other people. These traits contributed to his fulfilling the twelve labours imposed on him by king Eurystheus. The Superman character is the analogical role model in the contemporary popular fiction. As his origin story established, Superman's strength is derived from his alien origin. Like Heracles, he embodies the unity of human ideals and supernatural power, but also restraint and humility towards other less-gifted people of this world derived from his simple rural upbringing. Jerry Siegel, the creator of Superman, openly describes the influence of the mythological characters behind the original conception of the Man of Steel: "I am lying in bed when suddenly it hits me. […] I conceive a character like Samson, Hercules and all the strong men I ever heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so." (Martin)

The second well-known mythological character is Odysseus. Unlike Heracles, the king of Ithaca and the hero of the Homer's epic does not possess any supernatural powers and he is not known for his physical strength but rather for his intelligence and cunning that help him in his long journey home to his loving wife Penelope. Odysseus' modern counterpart is the second major superhero to appear in the late 1930s, Batman. Unlike Superman, he possesses no superpowers whatsoever; he has however trained both his body and mind to the extent of human potential and by utilising a number of gadgets at his disposal, he embodies the power of determination, resourcefulness and human wit.

There are many other characters in superhero comic books that make open acknowledgment to the mythological tradition – some borrowing only aspects of it, like the Amazon warrior Wonder Woman or Captain Marvel who, by uttering the magic word SHAZAM, is granted six archetypal powers.[4] Others are depicted directly as the same mythological characters (e.g. Thor, Ares, Hercules).

There is a direct relationship between the contemporary superhero genre and the ancient mythologies that goes beyond simple name-borrowing and extends to employment of the same functions of the narratives as was the case in the ancient cultures. "The mythic hero is also an amalgamation of a number of archetypal images, and as such is a part of our species' psychic inheritance, a universal constant that transcendents culture and time." (LoCicero 81)

In *The Republic* Plato acknowledges the importance and role of myth in society. He speaks in favour of telling children stories that are not necessarily true but possess moral value, views it as just and advocates a certain level of censorship of stories that children come to contact with:

> I said, that we begin by telling children stories which, though not wholly destitute of truth, are in the main fictitious; […] the beginning is the most important part of any work, especially in the case of a young and tender thing; for that is the time at which the character is being formed and the desired impression is more readily taken. […] the first thing will be to establish a censorship of the writers of fiction, and let the censors receive any tale of fiction which is good, and reject the bad; and we will desire mothers and nurses to tell their children the authorised ones only. (Plato 4589)

Plato was aware of the tremendous impact that story-telling has on children of an early age. It is also clear that Plato does not concern himself with the truth value of the stories told to children but rather with their moral value: the stories need not to be true to tell the right message that we want our children to hear. Considering the fact that the readership of superhero narratives consists for

[4] SHAZAM stands for the wisdom of **S**olomon, the strength of **H**ercules, the stamina of **A**tlas, the power of **Z**eus, the courage of **A**chilles and the speed of **M**ercury.

a great part of adolescents it seems that these stories in our culture passed the censorship code that Plato mentions, and there are values and traditions embedded in them that we want our children to know.

However, not every myth is designed to anchor important ideas in our mind and culture. Some aim to challenge them as well and the same goes for superhero narratives as the form of modern mythology. From its conception the genre evolved beyond the traditional binary view of good and bad and the values have become increasingly more ambiguous. What we may call a classical superhero narrative, with its clear dichotomy of good and bad, reinforces the basic cultural values of the society while the later postmodern works offer more insight into and reflection of the same values and they tend to challenge and criticise their absolute definition.

2.2 Differentiating Between Heroes and Superheroes

A hero is "a person, typically a man, who is admired for their courage, outstanding achievements or noble qualities" (Soanes 181487) and in the context of mythology and folklore "a person of superhuman qualities and often semi-divine origin, in particular one whose exploits were the subject of ancient Greek myths" (Soanes 181487). We can therefore summarise the attributes of a hero figure into two categories:

(1) he is admired for both noble character and good deeds

(2) he possesses extraordinary abilities (possibly of supernatural origin)

It needs to be made clear that the concept of *hero* has a different meaning in the context of ancient mythology and in the contemporary world. A firefighter who selflessly saves a child is called hero in accordance with definition (1) but not (2). However in ancient mythology there are characters who fit both definitions or only one: Odysseus who has no supernatural power is a hero according to definition (1), Heracles who possesses both supernatural strength and noble character is a hero

according to both definitions (1) and (2), and nearly-immortal Achilles who ruthlessly desecrates Hector's body is a hero only according to definition (2).

Superhero character must be understood as a subset of the category of heroes. Their unique characteristic in this regard is that they must necessarily embody both of the above definitions. The contrastive function to superheroes is represented by supervillains: despite fitting the ancient definition of *hero* (2) they fall short of the noble character trait (1) and therefore they traditionally have the narrative role of antagonists. In some prominent storylines some superheroes also walk the thin line between being a hero or a villain. Even the most prominent paragons of good sometimes turn to evil: Superman's heroic identity is damaged when his moral sense is affected by red Kryptonite.

Two literary categories have been established – *superheroes* and *supervillains.* However, the case can be made that the traditional comprehension of a superhero in the popular fiction contains a contradiction even so: there are numerous existing superhero characters with no superpowers at all (e.g. Batman, Captain America, Green Arrow, Hawkeye, almost all protagonists of *Watchmen*). The defining ability of these characters lies in mastering a particular skill to the extent of human possibilities: Captain America and Batman are expert martial artists, Green Arrow and Hawkeye are expert marksmen, etc. Nonetheless, this means that they fit only one half (1) of the above definition of a superhero but not the other (2). In order to deal with this problem we must consider the level of their mastery to be superhuman. This conjecture feels acceptable since Captain America never loses a fist fight with villains, Green Arrow never misses his target, etc.

The issues listed above reveal that the term *superhero* should not be considered a mere extension of the Greek word *heros* in terms of its meaning but rather as a standalone cultural category that needs to be defined beyond the original meaning of the stem of the word.

4. Behind the Mask: The Secret of Secret Identity

Why do superheroes wear masks? Why bother with designing your own brightly-coloured garb and coming up with an original name for your own superhero persona? Not to mention having to put up with those absurdly large capes that simply must be in the way all the time or having to stitch up your damaged attire after every night out. Although there are some examples of characters who are able to do without the mask and the costume altogether, the golden rule of the genre is clear – if you want to make yourself a name in the superhero business, you need to come up with a fancy costume and a catchy name.

If we look at the trope of mask-wearing in the history of the literature, there is scarcely anything that resembles this concept as it was introduced in the 20th century in the superhero genre. Some names do pop up – *the Phantom of the Opera*, *the Man in the Iron Mask* or a myriad of forgettable romantic characters that conceal their identity on purpose during the narrative in order to reveal it with shocking effect during the climax scene. However, none of these truly comes close to the trope of superhero mask or even costume: the superhero genre creates a novel use for masks. In literary fiction, especially in adventure stories, masks are traditionally associated with negative criminal characters, often stereotyped as carrying a big bag of money conspicuously marked with the dollar sign. The purpose of the mask in this context is straightforward – the character is committing a felony and he does not want to be recognised by the authorities. However, superheroes clearly have the urge to conceal their identity in similar manner, despite the fact that they are not antagonists.

The reasons for superheroes wearing masks are twofold: external, derived from the environment in which the character operates; and internal, rooted in the psychology and motivation of each particular character.

4.1 External Reasons: Literary Tradition of the Mask

The most frequent reason for wearing a mask cited within the diegetic world of superhero narratives is the concern for the hero's loved ones. If one decides to embark on a path of a crime-fighter he certainly does not want his significant other to pay the ultimate price for it. In a world where criminals wield power equal to superheroes the idea of retaliation seems very real and it certainly feels like a good argument for concealing your civil identity from such people. This is part of why members of contemporary special forces within police and army are masked when they go on raids against dangerous criminals. However, this explanation doesn't fully appreciate the literary significance of the mask. In order to examine the external reasons for wearing a mask more closely we must first take a brief tour through history to observe the formula of costumed vigilantes that actually predate the modern concept of superheroes.

Prior to the introduction of Superman in 1938 a similar kind of heroic characters can be traced to inexpensive fiction magazines, often referred to as Pulp magazines, that were popular in the first half of the twentieth century in America. These stories featured a great number of vigilante characters also commonly dressing up in costumes, although compared to later superheroes the costumes of pulp characters were very civil, commonly consisting of only a period trench coat and a snap-brim fedora, and some means of covering face like a large scarf or an eye mask.

These characters of the 1930s like The Shadow, Green Hornet, The Avenger, The Spider, and The Lone Ranger were generally resourceful men and skilled fighters, some even possessing some kind of supernatural ability like psychic powers, and they were all dedicated crime-fighters. Out of their masks, in their civil identities, some posed as careless millionaire playboys, e.g. The Shadow and The Spider. Posing irresponsibly outside of their morally concerned role is another characteristic feature of some later superheroes and their corresponding civil identities, such as Batman (Bruce Wayne), Green Arrow (Oliver Queen), and Iron Man (Tony Stark).

Just like superheroes have their roots in Pulp publications, the Pulp characters themselves have their roots in two characters that are their direct literary predecessors: the masked crusader Zorro and his own inspiration, The Scarlet Pimpernel, both popular heroic outlaws fighting against the Establishment.

The Scarlet Pimpernel is a character from a 1905 novel of the same name by Baroness Emma Orczy, set in the Reign of Terror, a period of violence following the onset of the French Revolution in 1793-4. The Scarlet Pimpernel is an alter ego of a wealthy English nobleman who rescues men sentenced to death by guillotine and becomes a celebrated hero of the people. As a skilled swordsman, master of disguise and imaginative planner, the Pimpernel is always able to outsmart the authorities that are hunting him.

As a hero of the people, Zorro, first introduced in 1919, also possesses many distinctive traits that would be later attributed to superheroes. His story is set in the middle of the 19th century in California during the era of the Spanish rule. Zorro is a secret identity of the wealthy nobleman Don Diego de la Vega who, as the masked outlaw, helps to defend people against various villains as well as the local tyrannical Spanish authorities. His traits are that he is in peak physical condition, is an expert swordsman, and wears a cape and eye-mask as his costume. It is worth pointing out Zorro's resemblance with the character of Batman: his colour of choice is black, the only confidant in his mansion is his butler, and he has a secret cave as his hideout.

The inspiration for Zorro, The Scarlet Pimpernel and consequently all masked vigilantes and superhero characters can be generally traced as far back as to Robin Hood as the archetype for a heroic outlaw. What is notable about the evolution of this concept is the triangular relation between the people, the ruling power, and the masked hero. Ever since Robin Hood there has been a dichotomy with those in power going against the people. The hero fits into this scheme as the champion of the people, the only one who dares to fight back against the unjust oppression (as

seen in the examples of Robin Hood fighting against the English aristocracy, The Scarlet Pimpernel fighting against the French authorities or Zorro fighting against the Spanish rule).

In the eyes of the authorities the hero is synonymous with a criminal, thus the hero must conceal their identity from the law enforcers. In this traditional comprehension of the trope of mask-wearing we can conclude that the governance makes no distinction between a vigilante and a criminal and the difference is apparent only to the people. From another perspective in this threefold relationship the people generally see the government as villainous and oppressive and the vigilante as the only one taking their side against it.

The concept of a masked person opposing the ruling force saw substantial revision since it was applied to pulp characters of the 1930s and continued to evolve with the new genre of superheroes: superheroes began to work with the government, not against it. The hero figure was no longer synonymous with romantic mystery, heroism became a job like any other. That the vigilante traditionally needs a mask raises the question of why the government-employed or authorised superheroes still need to adopt an alter ego. The paradigm has developed from a diegetic world with a single hero protagonist (e.g. Zorro stories) to one which includes various actors with a range of motivating factors and attitudes towards the government and uses of disguise (the contemporary superhero narrative). The evolution of the standard norm of *hero vs. establishment* dichotomy causes the once single and unified attitude against the authorities to be diluted with the rising number of characters and narratives.

Different explanations have been utilised in the superhero narratives to justify the continuous presence of the mask. We must distinguish between those characters that maintain close ties with the government and those who do not: Superman and Captain America's costumes function as a beacon of hope and the symbol of the country, but do not protect their identity; they are commonly seen as being closely involved with the government. Other characters, like Spider-Man, Daredevil, and Rorschach, remain true to the tradition of hiding their identity in order to

separate their civil lives from the crimes undertaken in their crime-fighting. As a result of being secretive they do not enjoy either praise or understanding from the government or media, nor do they usually have support of the authorities in their endeavours. They must adopt masks to maintain a normal life outside their superhero facades.

Batman presents a complex character when considered from this perspective as he used to have a criminal-like reputation in Gotham but eventually managed to build a mutual-trust relationship with at least police commissioner Gordon. He is one of those heroes who walk the line between acting with or without the government's approval.

For some heroes the presence of the mask is justified in the exact same way as it was in the time of Zorro, for others it is simply a reminiscence of the familiar concept and perhaps a certain homage to the tradition. This change in the attitude towards the ruling power with some heroes no longer opposing but rather becoming an integral part of the government body is consequently depicted as threatening in several major postmodern storylines. Black Panther and Dr. Strange describe the present relationship between the U.S. government and superheroes in *New Avengers: Illuminati* as tense: "We're not anti-establishment but we're not establishment. We're counter-establishment." (Bendis 6). In the similar manner Batman in the dystopian world of *The Dark Knight Returns* sees the position of vigilantes outside the law as a must: "'Sure we're criminals,' you said. 'We've always been criminals. We have to be criminals.'" (Miller 135)

This theme of attempting to institutionalise heroes along with the morals they stand for and integrate them into the government body keeps surfacing in the superhero narratives since the end of the 1980s. Various writers approached this idea from different angles but they all agree that it does not benefit if the traditionally anonymous voice of the people opposing the ruling power becomes its integral part. Before the outbreak of the Civil War, Captain America voices these concerns about the legislative forcing all superheroes to unmask and become employees of the government in a fiery exchange of views with the government operative Maria Hill:

Captain America: You're asking me to arrest people who risk their lives for this country every day of the week.

Maria Hill: No, I'm asking you to obey the will of American people, Captain.

Captain America: Don't play politics with me, Hill. Superheroes need to stay above that stuff or Washington starts telling us who the super-villains are.

Maria Hill: I thought super-villains were guys in masks who refused to obey the law. (Civil War #1 23)

It does not help to try to label the masked hero within the traditional antithetical categories of good guy/bad guy because the character clearly possesses certain characteristics of both. The hero figure is traditionally driven by personal code of benevolent ethics, fights against malevolent characters and helps those in need; at the same time he is likely to disrespect the laws of society, especially if they stand in the way of what he recognises as the morally right thing to do. In order to be convincing in acting outside conventional society the masked hero needs to be understood as a predominantly moral voice that cannot be effective without a guise and therefore must necessarily stand apart from conventional society and outside the governing body, which often comes with the burden of being labelled a criminal.

4.2 Internal Reasons: The Secret Identity

Superheroes elevated the whole concept of an identity-concealing mask to entirely new level and created the tradition of costume which in turn creates a whole secondary identity. Costume is thus no longer designed to simply conceal the identity of its wearer but it is actually an extension of the psychology of the protagonist wearing it. A comparison to fully appreciate the function and concept of a mask and a costume is not trivial: understanding the difference bears literary significance. A mask is usually designed only for the facial area; when someone puts it on, he does

not create a new identity, he merely conceals his own. A costume is usually all-encompassing and wearing it creates an entirely new identity.

A noteworthy tradition in the superhero genre is that the masked hero and the civil person are radically different personalities, commonly two opposite extremes of a particular characteristic: confident Superman is the opposite of awkward Clark Kent, conscientious Batman is the opposite of vain Bruce Wayne, strong Spider-Man is the opposite of weak Peter Parker, etc. By putting on their costume these characters are making a statement that the rules that restrain them in their civil lives, should it be the limitations of their own civil persona or the laws of society, are no longer valid and they are now free to act as they will, with no regard for restrictions of any kind, save only for their own conscience. “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” (Wilde) This is exactly what the superhero narratives are all about – stripping off the confinements of our civil lives and embracing some greater value as our own.

With some characters’ development the dominant identity changes and it is the costumed one which attains the primary position in the individual’s life. Some characters are able to balance out their two lives while others become consumed by their mission, even to the extent that they resemble psychotic traits. An example of this development and the effect it has on mental stability is seen in Batman. The character started as Bruce Wayne who underwent a life-changing experience in his childhood when both his parents were murdered in front of him. This is the beginning of Bruce’s personal mission to bring down all criminals in his home city of Gotham, the decision which in time gave birth to his superhero persona of Batman. As years passed and he became more and more involved in his war against crime, the initial primary identity of Bruce Wayne became secondary to the identity of Batman. The promise to his parents had become the only goal in life for Bruce and he started to gradually neglect his civil life which no longer had any significance for him. At this point the character is more himself when he is wearing the Batman costume than in acting out Bruce Wayne’s everyday life as a wealthy playboy.

Many of Batman's superhero colleagues in the Justice League of America express concern about his mental state and his absolute devotion to his cause. There is even a conflict about what he should be called by his colleagues when he is in guise, showing his attempt to escape the dual nature of his life:

> Superman: I admire you. Through sheer, determined will you've made yourself the best you can be, you're my friend… but I don't like you. […] My life is motivated by what I believe is love, while yours… there's a darkness in you that's ugly. Very ugly— and it will kill you.
>
> Batman: Nothing can kill me. Anything that tries, makes me stronger.
>
> Superman: You're less connected to humanity than I am.
>
> Batman: You here to save me?
>
> Superman: I can't do that. You're the best, but I need you to be better, I need to know that you'll try to find peace.
>
> Batman: I will. When my war is over.
>
> Superman: Batman…
>
> Batman: Kal-El, my name is Bruce.
>
> Superman: You haven't heard a thing I've said, have you? Bruce is just a mask. (Azzarello, "For Tomorrow" 15-7)

When it comes to psychologically traumatised superheroes there is no better example than Rorschach in *Watchmen*. Psychology is the defining aspect of the character, not only on the obvious level of the name of his hero persona and his mask which is a mere white cloth covering his face with constantly shifting black dots, making a reference to the well-known psychological inkblot test, but also in the origin story of the character and his fundamental motivation. Rorschach is the prototype of a haunted antihero, totally consumed by his mission to the extent that nothing from the original civil persona remains. Issue #6 of *Watchmen* focuses solely on the character's origin,

taking the form of an interview with a psychologist at the penitentiary that Rorschach was transported to after he had been taken in by the police. The conversation between the doctor and his patient reveals Rorschach's traumatising childhood experiences that made him very conscious of the poor state of the world, forced him to distinguish the good and the bad in absolutes and lead him to his radical worldview about the rotten and despicable state of the human society and the decision to follow a solitary life in the pursuit of retributive vigilantism. The doctor tries to convince him that he did not quite get the full picture of human nature and that there is good in the world too, but all these attempts eventually come in vain as the author Alan Moore does a very good job of articulating Rorschach's nihilistic immoral worldview that he accepted after his original decision to kill a criminal rather than apprehend him to the police:

> "[I] looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone. Live our lives, lacking anything better to do. Devise reason later. Born from oblivion; bear children, hell-bound as ourselves; go into oblivion. There is nothing else. Existence is random. Has no pattern save for what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose." (Moore, "Watchmen #6" 26)

These fears of human insignificance that slumber in everyone's mind which shaped Rorschach's character eventually get to the doctor as well and the following contemplation of his own life through his patient's philosophy has devastating effects on his personal life.

The line between a mentally stable and unstable person in the context of superheroes boils down not only to the time spent in and out of the costume but also to how well they manage to keep their dual identities separate in their mind. The most traumatised heroes, such as Rorschach, the Punisher, and Batman, who abandoned their civil lives altogether in pursuit of their mission and became consumed by their alter egos reveal the danger of such absolute devotion to a cause. Alan

Moore invokes Nietzsche to comment on this danger of commitment to a bipolar ethical view in the conclusion to *Watchmen* #6, a warning relevant to the entire genre: “Battle not with monsters, lest ye became a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.” (Moore, “Watchmen #6” 28)

4.3 The Peculiar Case of Kal-El

Despite being the grandfather and archetype for all other superheroes Superman’s case is radically different from all others when it comes to the matter of secret identity. The majority of superhero characters follow the pattern of being born into their civil identity and undergoing some dramatic life-altering event that eventually brings them to the decision of putting on a costume and launching out on the career of a masked crime-fighter. In other words, the person behind the mask is the real deal, the costume is what comes later. Not so with Superman: Bill, portrayed by David Carradine, in *Kill Bill Volume 2* (2004) points out this issue so well that it is worth to quote him in full:

> As you know, I'm quite keen on comic books. Especially the ones about superheroes. I find the whole mythology surrounding superheroes fascinating. Take my favorite superhero, Superman. Not a great comic book. Not particularly well-drawn. But the mythology... The mythology is not only great, it's unique. […] Now, a staple of the superhero mythology is, there's the superhero and there's the alter ego. Batman is actually Bruce Wayne, Spider-Man is actually Peter Parker. When that character wakes up in the morning, he's Peter Parker. He has to put on a costume to become Spider-Man. And it is in that characteristic Superman stands alone. Superman didn't become Superman. Superman was born Superman. When Superman wakes up in the morning, he's Superman. His alter ego is Clark Kent. His outfit with the big red *S*, that's the blanket he was wrapped in as a baby

> when the Kents found him. Those are his clothes. What Kent wears - the glasses, the business suit - that's the costume. That's the costume Superman wears to blend in with us. Clark Kent is how Superman views us. And what are the characteristics of Clark Kent? He's weak... he's unsure of himself... he's a coward. Clark Kent is Superman's critique on the whole human race. (Tarantino 1:44:15)

Unlike other superhero characters, Superman actually has to deal with not two, but three identities. He was born on another planet as Kal-El, came to Earth as a baby where his foster parents gave him the name Clark Kent and when he eventually revealed his abilities to the people of Metropolis they constructed for him the artificial identity of Superman. What is unique for Superman in this regard is that the development of his powers preceded the development of his civil identity. When he left the Kent farm and moved to Metropolis the civil identity was already a costume reminding him to restrain the true extent of his powers. It is only as the hero Superman that he can explore his limits and be truly himself. Likewise, the costume with the bright red and blue and the *S* sign that inspired the name for his superhero persona, are all part of his alien identity – they are the symbols of his lost home planet.

For most superheroes the idea is to keep their civil identity safe and separate as something to come back to when they are done chasing criminals for the night. But what is then Superman's motivation to slip back into the skin of uptight and clumsy Clark Kent? Why does he not simply spend all his time flying around in red and blue? The reason for this is psychological: Superman may be an alien and feel like an alien but he was brought up by loving human foster parents and has the psychology of a human being and therefore feels the need to belong. According to the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, "our need to connect to others is paramount to our well-being, prioritized just below our physiological needs[.]" (Waid 327) Since Earth is the only home Superman came to know in his life, as one of the few survivors of the planet Krypton's destruction he desires to experience all the highs and lows of a normal human life: only as Clark Kent can he belong and

pursue happiness. “Belongingness is the driving force of human behavior […] [b]elonging to a community provides the sense of security and agency that makes our brains happy”. (Denning)

As he is not one of the people he protects Superman is alone among the superhero community to legitimately exhibit the messianic secret, “the reluctance of Christ to reveal the fullness of what and who he really is until the people around him are ready to understand and accept it” (Morris, “What’s Behind the Mask?” 4518). As the genre develops and superhero characters become more and more human over time, the unique quality of the alien origin of the Man of Steel grows in importance. The notion of being a visitor to this world while being one of us at the same time gives the character a unique allure. “The greatest guardian, defender, and savior must be one of us, while also being more than us.” (Morris “What’s Behind the Mask?” 4518)

5. Morality

The interest in superheroes begins with fascination for their amazing powers but the long-term interest in the masked do-gooders is based on the increasingly sophisticated narrative and character development. Superheroes are an epitome of good and their stories reflect the same moral lessons that we value outside of narrative fiction.

> The superhero narrative can be seen as an exaggerated narrative reflecting the choices we must make in our lives. As such, they are given exceptional characteristics so that we might hope to live up to a fraction of the good that they do in their worlds. (Reynolds 1349)

One of the most fundamental peculiarities behind the concept of a superhero is the basic question of why do they do what they do. The character of a contemporary superhero is more relatable to the reader as he is conceived as a troubled person faced with an array of difficult choices catalysed by the sudden gain of amazing powers, not the perfect all-redeeming messiah of the 1940s. Asking the question *Why are superheroes good?* addresses ethical questions of morality in the reality of our everyday lives. Identifying the reasons behind the hero's benevolence forms a core part of their identity and has contributed to more than seventy years of compelling story-telling.

5.1 Why Are Superheroes Good? The Practical Explanation

Comics are recognised as a primarily story-telling medium: the main idea behind the conception of every superhero character is pre-eminently to tell a story. This premise brings a trivial answer to the initial question: the superheroes are good because they must be good. The binary opposition between good and bad is the defining characteristic for story-telling in general. The reader must clearly identify the protagonist and antagonist of the story, as the two must

clash in battle. Superhero stories are fundamentally adventure stories concerning an adversarial struggle between a clearly identifiable protagonist and their various antagonists.

The dichotomy was substantially more obvious in the early works of the genre. Although in time the stories have become increasingly more complex to interpret and analyse even the most morally ambiguous postmodern storyline must have a clearly identifiable protagonist and antagonist in order for the story to work on the narrative level, even though their fundamental moral values may be turned upside down: the actions and the ethical nature of motivation of each main character in *Watchmen* are largely open to the reader's interpretation and the novel guides its readers to evaluate the characters' deeds through their own morality, yet their roles of protagonists and antagonists in the narrative are fixed. In the tradition of the genre the reader is inclined to associate the protagonist with a hero and the antagonist with a villain. In *Watchmen* we see the difference between interpretation and narrative function: despite being a violent and murderous psychopath Rorschach is a protagonist and Ozymandias, despite his sincere and eventually successful effort to save the world, is the villainous antagonist.

Just as the movie industry adopted the Hays Code[7] of moral content in motion pictures there was a movement to include a uniform moral code for comic books during the Golden and Silver Age. The pressure for the adoption of the moral code intensified after the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, a book by German-American psychiatrist Frederick Wertham, warning against the negative impact that the comic books allegedly had on juvenile readership. As the result, the Comics Code[8] was established in 1954 and included rules of responsible authorship, which among others clearly stated that "[i]n every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds." (History Matters) The Code commanded the tone of superhero stories and naturally the construction of their characters and plots.

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[7] Officially the Motion Picture Production Code
[8] Officially the Comics Code Authority

The two explanations for the morality of superheroes stated above are of practical nature, related to the narrative level and social context of the time. As such, they are of little relevance to interpretation and analysis of characters' motives for being good within the given discourse. In order for superheroes to become popular and maintain their popularity across decades and generations, they must be good in some broadly recognisable way that remains relevant to the reader.

5.2 Understanding Morality Through the Philosophy of Plato and Kierkegaard

Evaluating the ethical qualities of being good or bad has preoccupied philosophers for a long time, even Plato considered the ramifications of an individual gaining a superpower in his own way. The Ring of Gyges story in *The Republic* introduces the reader to a metaphor for our understanding of the function of good. Gyges was a common shepherd in the king of Lydia's service. By coincidence he came into possession of a magic ring that had the power to make him invisible. Upon discovering this and realising the potential his new artefact gives him Gyges does not hesitate and immediately turns against his king by seducing his wife and conspiring with her against her husband. He finally kills the king and takes possession of the kingdom for himself. Plato then goes on to make a point that "[n]o man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a God among men." (Plato 4297)

Plato is cynical in this view of morality. According to this perspective, there is clearly no inherent code of ethics embedded in every individual. His idea about a common man immediately turning to evil once he has a safe advantage over others reveals two approaches to understanding morality – the good of an individual and the good of society. Plato's logic suggests that the two are in fundamental opposition: "[a] man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any

good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust." (Plato 4297) There is nothing besides the oversight of other members of the society that forces us to be good: "the many who are weak cooperate to pass laws and whip up sufficient social disapproval to keep the few who are strong from completely taking over." (Brenzel 2705) Authority through strength is uncivilised and is the same way in which even animals respect authority. Plato sees this as a system of organisation which doesn't respect mankind's development. To replace strength we need morality to limit those who could otherwise easily take over. Despite the fact that there are always individuals in society clearly advantaged mentally, physically, or otherwise, the artificial concept of everyone being equal rooted in the laws of morality limits the few in order to elevate the most.

The second fundamental take on morality in *The Republic* is focused on the character, stating that without being just and good there is no way for a person to be happy: for everyone happiness is based on moral character. The reading of morality and happiness as directly related concepts inspires the reader to act based on the highest of human pursuits – happiness. In this view morality is contrasted as being the internal mechanism to achieve happiness for each individual, instead of laws devised by society to control the populace. To be immoral means to be unhappy, worse than the possible legal repercussions of breaking a law: the pursuit of happiness lies in moral actions.

A superpowered figure is a distinct representative of a privileged individual in society. Without the limiting influence of morality, both external and internal, such a person would have the top position in the social hierarchy of power and could never be challenged by other, less-gifted individuals. It is by embracing the moral principles of self-restraint and discipline that such a person gains the title of a superhero. This stance is rewarding in itself since being moral equals to pursuing happiness and satisfaction.

Other philosophers also perceived morality as a dual concept. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard describes a similar view in *Works of Love* and names it the Concept of Double Danger. This is a reformulation of similar ideas to those in Plato's *Republic*, heavily influenced by Christianity. According to Kierkegaard, in order for us to be good in life we must overcome internal and external dangers. The internal danger occurs when we must suppress our own selfish desires that go against the well-being of others. Similar to Plato's concept, Kierkegaard says that the initial attitude of every person is selfish but it is within our power to overcome this tendency and with our actions put the good of others above our personal interests.

The external danger lies in the society and its general reluctance to appreciate good in its pure form. Kierkegaard says: "give up your selfish desires and longings, give up your arbitrary plans and purposes so that you in truth work disinterestedly for the good—and submit to being abominated almost as a criminal, scorned and ridiculed for this very reason...but choose it freely." (Kierkegaard)

Superhero narratives form an interesting insight into the ethical matters. The notion of personal sacrifice for the good of others is crucial for many superhero stories. Personal sacrifice has been shown both as an admirable concept (e.g. Spider-Man who consistently helps others despite the devastating effects it has on his personal life) and a justification behind twisted logic of deranged villains (e.g. Ozymandias' grand decision in *Watchmen* to take on his own shoulders the death of millions in order to save billions).

5.3 The Ethics of Dr. Manhattan

Superheroes are often compared to gods walking the Earth in their stories. It is usually sufficient to be able to fly or lift a car with bare hands in order to acquire this label but there is one character who comes really close to being truly omnipotent. Dr. Manhattan is the single most powerful superhero in comic books and the only superpowered hero of Alan Moore and Dave

Gibbons' *Watchmen*. In 1959 an accident during a scientific experiment transformed Dr. Jonathan Osterman; due to the accident he gained abilities including the absolute control over matter, ability to shape reality with his mind – he is able to read objects on atomic level, travel instantaneously anywhere in the universe, split his existence and be present at several places at once, and has the unique ability to perceive events atemporally by seeing his own personal future and past simultaneously. Given the historical context of the Cold War he is quickly turned to a weapon by the American Government, given the nickname Dr. Manhattan and becomes "a walking nuclear deterrent" (Moore, "Watchmen #4" 31). What becomes of moral principles of a man turned into a nearly all-powerful being? Are the human principles of right and wrong even relevant to someone who "walked across the sun and seen events so tiny and so fast they hardly can be said to have occurred at all"? (Moore, "Watchmen #12" 18)

Dr. Manhattan's transformation causes a radically different worldview and emotional absence toward human affairs and suffering. It is implied that there are two sides to the character – some emotional residue from his past as Jonathan Osterman and his new superhuman self that is so above human affairs that they become largely irrelevant to him. He consistently exhibits indifference to various moral issues throughout the story, ranging from infidelity to murder and even nuclear holocaust. When Manhattan witnesses Edward Blake gunning down his pregnant girlfriend, he does not interfere (Moore, "Watchmen #2" 15), even though he has infinite ways how to prevent the murder.

As someone who is able to perceive the full grandiosity of the universe Dr. Manhattan does not think of human beings as morally valuable because the appreciation for the unique quality of life eludes him and he considers life to be "highly overrated phenomenon." (Moore, "Watchmen #9" 13) Since the difference between the state of being dead and alive cannot be quantifiably measured, he does not acknowledge such a distinction to be objectively relevant: "A live body and

a dead body contain the same number of particles. Structurally, there's no discernible difference. Life and death are unquantifiable abstracts." (Moore, "Watchmen #1" 21)

Is Manhattan's absolute knowledge of the reality of the world the reason for losing the personal sense of what is right and wrong in human terms? If this is the case it would mean that knowledge and morality are on the opposite sides of one scale and one can never possess both. As science progresses and we know more and more about the world, this hypothesis would mean that the knowledge would increasingly diminish our moral sense in the same way as it had happened to Dr. Manhattan.

This conjecture can be refuted: Albert Einstein certainly had a better idea of the workings of the universe than most people and it did not make him an immoral person; similarly, an adult has more knowledge than a child and yet we do not think of children as morally insignificant beings. More knowledge simply does not cause one to lose the sense of morality.

Dr. Manhattan's taciturn quality when it comes to voicing moral reasoning is often put in relation to his immense knowledge but the correlation between the two is merely implied, never explicitly stated. Although his nearly absolute knowledge makes him perceive human life in comparison to the wonders of the universe as "brief and mundane," (Moore, "Watchmen #9" 17) he is not entirely free of common human needs. He maintains a relationship with a fellow crime-fighter Laurie Juspeczyk and it is through her that the reader gets to hear most of Manhattan's moral reasoning. There is no question that his girlfriend is the most influential person in his life, quite possibly the only one who has impact on him at all: Dr. Manhattan's emotions towards Laurie are the decisive factor in establishing his overall moral stance towards humans in general.

The notion that emotions are highly relevant when dealing with ethical questions is among others proposed by the moral sense theorist David Hume, who strictly differentiates between reason and emotions (sentiment). In saying that "morality is determined by sentiment" (Hume 1601) he argues that our moral sense is based exclusively on emotions: a moral judgment is entirely non-

rational. Conceived as the ultimate rational being, Dr. Manhattan lacks the emotional capacity to make a moral judgment altogether.

The American psychologist Gustav Gilbert, who observed the Nazi leaders during the Nuremberg Trials, comes to a similar conclusion about the correlation between emotions and ethics. He is characterised[9] as saying, "In my work with the defendants I was searching for the nature of evil and I now think I have come close to defining it. A lack of empathy. It's the one characteristic that connects all the defendants, a genuine incapacity to feel with their fellow men. Evil, I think, is the absence of empathy." (Simoneau) Dr. Manhattan's lack of empathy is shown when he chooses not to intervene in life-or-death situations, such as Edward Blake's gunning down his pregnant girlfriend. Blake consequently comments on Manhattan's account "[y]ou didn't lift a finger. You really don't give a damn about human beings. […] You're driftin' outta touch, doc." (Moore, "Watchmen #2" 15) Manhattan fails to feel empathy towards the woman because the concept of life and death has no longer the same meaning for him as it has for other people.

We have established that emotions are crucial in the development of one's personal moral sense. Towards the end of the story Dr. Manhattan maintains only one emotional investment in the world and that is his girlfriend Laurie. Apart from her his emotional response towards anything or anyone else in the universe is non-existent. This emotional lethargy is presumably derived from his absolute knowledge: he simply knows too much about everything to be moved by anything. This is an expression of the danger of too much knowledge: his supreme knowledge makes him ignorant of the traditional human values.

Dr. Manhattan has one last remaining desire, revealed in the conversation with Laurie on Mars, a wish to observe the single one thing that has been eluding him to this point: "Thermo-dynamic miracles… Events with odds against so astronomical they're effectively impossible, like oxygen spontaneously becoming gold. I long to observe such a thing." (Moore, "Watchmen #9" 26)

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[9] In the 2000 television docudrama *Nuremberg*

It is the only moment in the whole story when he clearly expresses a selfish personal desire. What follows is a revelation about an important aspect of Laurie's life that forces Manhattan to re-evaluate his view of human life in general. He begins to see the human life as the miracle he was longing for a long time:

> In each human coupling, a thousand million sperm vie for a single egg. Multiply those odds by countless generations, against the odds of your ancestors being alive, meeting, siring this precise son, that exact daughter… Until your mother loves a man she has every reason to hate, and of that union, of the thousand million children competing for fertilization, it was you, only you that emerged. To distill so specific a form from that chaos of improbability, like turning air to gold… That is the crowning unlikelihood. The thermo-dynamic miracle. (Moore, "Watchmen #9" 27)

When he appreciates the unique quality of his girlfriend's life he applies the same reasoning to the whole humanity: "The world is so full of people, so crowded with these miracles that they become commonplace and we forget…. I forget." (Moore, "Watchmen #9" 27) As a result, he ends his seclusion and returns to Earth, willing to interfere in the human affairs once again because he no longer sees them as irrelevant. Manhattan's emotional development sets off his moral sense which eventually forces him to act and do the right thing.

The story of *Watchmen* explores how morals apply to a cosmic being with nearly infinite power and knowledge. Even though his moral sense is largely diminished, Dr. Manhattan is forced to acknowledge his own relevance to the world and other people, eventually making him accept the fact that he is morally accountable as well. Dr. Manhattan's personal development is shown when he replaces his wonder for a hypothetical, miracle-like event, the changing of an atom, for the wonder for every single human life. In doing so, he comes to appreciate the universe as a whole.

5.4 The Tangled Web of Consequentialism: Reading Spider-Man as Promoter of Civil Responsibility

The conflict between civil and personal responsibility is a recurring situation in the Spider-Man comic book. In a typical model situation Peter Parker is hastily swinging through the streets in his costume in order to make it to a date with his girlfriend on time, when he comes across a situation that requires his intervention, e.g. a building on fire with several people trapped inside. Being the hero he is, Peter does not hesitate and rescues them. As a result he fails to arrive at the meeting and his girlfriend consequently breaks up with him because she is unaware of his secret identity and this was not the first time he let her down in this manner. Peter's personal life therefore suffered as the direct result of his decision motivated by choosing the greater good, the morally right thing to do. As this kind of situation becomes his daily routine, there is a growing frustration in Peter concerning the poor state of his personal life that keeps suffering at the expense of his secret superhero identity. Finally he decides he will no longer carry on as Spider-Man. Is Peter obliged to risk his own life on regular basis on the grounds of the simple fact of him possessing superpowers?

The evaluation of Peter's reasoning from ethical perspective requires invoking a consequentialist philosophy, particularly utilitarianism. Consequentialists claim that there are no absolute definitions of good and evil and the morality of each action should be judged exclusively on the basis of its consequences. Utilitarianism is a normative ethics theory that directly links human experience such as happiness or suffering to the moral concepts of good and bad. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill belong to major proponents of utilitarianism; three rules derived from their philosophy are in turn applied here to the context of superhero narratives:

Rule #1: In order for a person to do good, he or she must choose the course of action that leads to maximising overall happiness and/or reducing overall suffering in the world.[10]

This is a simplified reformulation of the Greatest Happiness Principle by John Stuart Mill who holds that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure." (Mill 104) Utilitarianism does not relate the quantity of happiness or suffering to any one individual, it is concerned with the overall presence of it in the world: one cannot justify their decision on the grounds of what makes them happy or sad but must instead give preference to whatever is beneficial in this regard to others. In the model situation Peter is faced with the choice between preventing a great suffering (saving people from fire) and in comparison a petty suffering (the emotional hurt of his girlfriend). That the lesser suffering is more relevant to Peter personally and may damage his personal life is not a relevant factor here. The Greatest Happiness Principle establishes Peter's decision as proper.

Rule #2: A person should live to the fullest possible extent of his own potential in order to produce the greatest good possible.

This is an implied rule in the utilitarian philosophy. If "pleasure and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends[,]" (Mill 104) then all endeavour in life must be directed towards maximising pleasure[11] and minimising pain. Utilitarianistic philosophy is not exclusively concerned with evaluating individual decisions, it also insists on personal growth of an individual in the long

[10] The happiness or suffering resulting from the decision should not be linked in any way to the one making the decision, for "standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether" (Mill 179)

[11] The pleasure in this context refers to any stimulant of human mind that leads to happiness.

run: everyone should work hard in life in order to achieve their fullest potential and thus bring the most happiness into the world.

This rule is a well-articulated motivator for any person with superpowers – it ultimately answers the question whether such an individual is obligated to become a superhero in order to use his powers for good; or whether it is his right to hide his powers in order to have a normal life. Although Peter enjoys his newly gained freedom and plentitude of free time following his decision to stop being a superhero, he is soon faced with a situation which forces him to make a judgment call and no intervention from his part would directly result in someone's death. This experience reminds Peter of his decision in the origin story of the character and he ultimately comes to terms with the utilitarian reasoning:

> Now, at last.. It's all crystal clear to me once more! I can never renounce my Spider-Man identity! I can never fail to use the powers which a mysterious destiny has seen fit to give me! No matter how unbearable the burden may be… No matter how great my personal sacrifice.. I can never permit one innocent being to come to harm… because Spider-Man failed to act… (Lee, "The Amazing Spider-Man" 18)

As superpowers need to be considered an integral part of Peter's potential, by the utilitarian philosophy he is obliged to always take action in situations when help is required; as much as a smart and gifted person is obligated to develop his potential in order to contribute the greatest good possible in their future profession.

Rule #3: A person's actions to achieve good should be only within the immediate limits of that person's power.

Being a superhero is risky; the extent of Spider-Man's superpowers does not prevent him from getting hurt in dangerous situations. He acknowledges this and continues to deliberately put his life at risk on regular basis. Is this kind of behaviour admirable or should it be condemned? An important point in utilitarian philosophy is that everyone should stand up only to the challenge they see themselves fit to stand up to. Utilitarianism does not call for supererogatory acts. Supererogatory acts are acts "above and beyond call of duty. [They] are good to do but not bad not to do." (Robichaud 3168) The same principle applies for the work ethics of emergency services: A firefighter's job description includes an acceptable risk and constant evaluation of situation. This logic also applies to superheroes. Due to his superpowers, Spider-Man's possibilities outreach the possibilities of common men and his evaluation of situation takes this into account. Such reasoning projects to everyday reality of the character's life: every time Peter sees a hostage situation on the news, witnesses an accident on the street, or learns that a serial killer is on the loose, his sense of responsibility forces him to act because his extraordinary abilities allow him to do so. Non-superpowered people are free from such predicament: they do not need to feel guilty for not intervening in dangerous situations because they are as likely to get hurt as anyone else.

Utilitarianism acknowledges devotion to the production of happiness as the only ultimate decisive factor and personal sacrifice as acceptable means of reaching this end.

> The utilitarian morality does recognize in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others. It only refuses to admit that the sacrifice is itself a good. A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum of total happiness, it considers as wasted. The only self-renunciation which it applauds, is devotion to the happiness, or to some of the means of happiness, of others; either of mankind collectively, or of individuals within the limits imposed by the collective interests of mankind. (Mill 273)

As the direct result of his decision to become a costumed crime-fighter, Peter Parker's lifestyle is very stressful and he is often disenchanted with the reality of his personal life: apart from the physical pain and mental strain he is also often jobless, penniless and without a girlfriend. In accordance with utilitarianism he makes a personal sacrifice to fulfill his moral duty.

The source of Peter Parker's moral responsibility has been established on the grounds of utilitarian philosophy. How does the same reasoning apply to all the others who cannot stick to walls and do not have the proportionate power of the spider, the regular people who go around their day jobs and deal with their own issues most of the time? An important but curious minor character to the Spider-Man stories is the hot-headed editor of the fictional New York newspaper the Daily Bugle, J. Jonah Jameson, who is always the first one to publicly condemn the superhero's latest endeavour. It is largely because of his rampant editorials in the Bugle that Spider-Man has never lived to see any appreciation in the eyes of public. The reason behind Jameson's hostility towards Spider-Man has never been made explicitly clear in the comics: the reader is always aware of the superhero's best efforts to do good, yet the same actions are consistently interpreted by Jameson in negative light and his paper portrays Spider-Man as menace. Why does Jameson have such a hard time seeing this character the same way the readers do?

Jameson comes across as being uncomfortable with an obvious and imminent display of heroic behaviour. He embodies the notion that people like inspirational stories about great men but feel intimidated when confronted with heroism directly: he rejects the idea of selfless heroism. Jameson is an epitome of a common practical man who is preoccupied with his own selfish interests, e.g. selling as many copies of the Daily Bugle as possible. Since slandering Spider-Man has proved to be a viable strategy for him in the past, he will gladly continue to do so.

As pointed out in the chapter 5.2, according to philosophies of Plato and Søren Kierkegaard we live in a world inhabited by people driven by selfish interests; the ordinary level of moral virtue is not very high. The long line of prophets and peace promoters who met an abrupt and violent end

in their lives, ranging from Jesus, Gandhi, or Martin Luther King to John Lennon, suggests that people tend to prefer saint-like figures from safe distance but feel uneasy when faced with selfless heroism directly. Spider-Man narratives acknowledge this by utilising the contrast between the superhero protagonists and the critical perspective of J. Jonah Jameson as the representative of a common man.[12]

An iconic statement of the superhero genre is traditionally attributed to Peter Parker's uncle Ben: "with great power there must also come great responsibility." (Lee, "The Amazing Fantasy" 11) This simple creed proved useful for Peter on numerous occasions but is also applicable outside of fictional narratives. The moral lesson from reading Spider-Man stories is transferable to everyman: every individual has some sort of power which assigns him the appropriate level of responsibility. For the context of normal people's lives Spider-Man's message could thus be articulated in less catchy but more convenient *the amount of responsibility one should feel is directly proportional to the amount of power they wield*. This brings the rest of us who do not spend their nights in costume on rooftops back in the game.

5.5 Utilitarian Ozymandias and Deontological Rorschach. The Threat of Authority in *Watchmen*

The narrative of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* is driven by a secret scheme of the antagonist Ozymandias who plans nothing less than saving the world from certain destruction from nuclear weapons during the Cold War; his plan however comes at the cost of several million lives: he plans to teleport a genetically engineered creature that would detonate upon its arrival to New York, correctly assuming that the imminent palpable threat of alien invasion would force the political leaders of the world to end hostilities and unite against the common enemy. Three

[12] The theme was also explored by Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross in the graphic novel *Marvels*, narrated from the unusual angle of common bystanders. The story sums up the overall history of the Marvel universe and reveals fear and insecurity that heroic deeds evoke in the residents of Manhattan Island.

fundamental rules of the utilitarian philosophy were established in the previous chapter. Can Ozymandias' reasoning withstand the test of utilitarian thinking?

The world of the alternate 1980s in *Watchmen* is still plunged deep in the worst state of the Cold War with no hope for any change for the better in sight. Ozymandias is very conscious of the global situation and the impending danger of nuclear holocaust. During the climax scene of the novel he reveals this knowledge as the main source of motivation behind his plan:

> I saw east and west, locked into an escalating arms spiral, their mutual terror and suspicion mounting with the missiles, making the possibility of disarmament progressively more remote. […] Meanwhile, expensive arsenals meant less cash to spend upon their old; their sick and homeless; on their children's education. As stockpiles grew, as computers reduced human involvement, the spectre of accidental apocalypse stalked even closer. Simply given the mathematics of the situation, sooner or later conflict would be inevitable (Moore, "Watchmen #11" 21)

Ozymandias, Andrian Veidt by civil name, is a man of reason, one who carefully weights the consequences of his actions on almost mathematical level, a characteristic of consequentialist philosophy. His actions are in perfect accordance with the three utilitarian rules stated in the previous chapter 5.4: he makes the mathematically correct calculation that sacrificing the lives of several million people is justifiable if it saves lives of even greater number of people (Rule #1), he continually develops the potential of both his body and mind, becoming a world-class athlete and gaining the reputation of "world's smartest man[,]" (Moore, "Watchmen #1" 17) accumulating enough wealth to allow him to carry out his plan (Rule #2) and finally, since his plan is successful and Ozymandias effectively averts the threat of nuclear holocaust, his ambition must be acknowledged as fully within his reach (Rule #3). Even though Veidt's logical reasoning is

flawless, a pressing notion that there is something terribly wrong in sacrificing millions of lives is present, no matter what the outcome might be.

The moral conundrum of the situation is reflected on the reactions of the four remaining protagonists: they all share the opinion that Veidt's plan was morally wrong; however, their opinions differ about the best following course of action. Since the explosion in New York has already occurred and the harm cannot be undone, there is a common consensus among three characters that exposing Adrian's plan would benefit nobody and it would only undone the good that his plan had eventually brought about: they agree they will keep the true nature of events to themselves.

The fourth protagonist, Rorschach, is the only one in opposition. He is depicted as moral absolutist, distinguishing between good and evil in absolutes. This dichotomy lacking any shade of gray is symbolically reflected on his mask: "Black and white moving. Changing shape… but not mixing. No gray. Very, very beautiful." (Moore, "Watchmen #6" 10) Rorschach's motivation is driven by the will to always do the right thing without any regard for the consequences, a stance eloquently expressed in his personal mantra that gains literal meaning towards the end of the story: "There is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon, I shall not compromise in this." (Moore, "Watchmen #1" 24) The global scale of Veidt's scheme has no effect on the fundamental moral reasoning: lying and killing innocent people is wrong, therefore Veidt should be exposed and punished, even if it means plunging the world into the danger of nuclear war again.

The idea that an action should not be judged at all on the grounds of its consequences is inherent to deontology. Deontological ethics claim that our decisions should be based only on our moral duty:

> "Deontology goes beyond saying that the ends never justify the means. It actually says that at least in moral decisions, you shouldn't think in terms of ends and

> means, or consequences, at all. Once you start thinking about means and ends, you've left the realm of morality altogether, because you're only thinking about how to get something you want, either for yourself or someone else." (Loftis 1193)

As a moral absolutist, Rorschach must have an underlying moral sense that guides his actions. His morality is rooted in the origin story of the character, the experience that transformed him from Walter Kovács into the vigilante Rorschach. His transformation was deeply psychological: the confrontation with the sheer brutality that people are capable of caused him to take a secular stance in disregarding any external source of morality and lead him to the realisation that "God was not there. The cold suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone. […] There is nothing else." (Moore, "Watchmen #6" 26) Rorschach is concerned exclusively with his own subjective moral judgment. The lesson he brought from his transformative experience is that "[t]his rudderless world is not shaped by vague metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only us." As such, Rorschach "was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world." (Moore, "Watchmen #6" 26)

Deontology does not end with stating that we should disregard consequences of our decisions on behalf of their moral value. One of Kant's categorical imperatives provide an insight into the fundamental nature of moral reasoning of Ozymandias and Rorschach:

> Man and generally any rational being exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end. (Kant 637)

This statement designates all human beings as untouchable units that cannot be a part of quantifiable reasoning between good and evil: it is not permissible to use a single human life as means of reaching one's goal, rational beings must always be treated as ends in themselves.

Both Ozymandias and Rorschach violate Kant's categorical imperative: Rorschach does not hesitate to beat people senseless in order to get the information he needs and kills criminals as penalty for their deeds; Ozymandias' scheme is based on collateral damage in form of the death of millions. Utilitarianism in Ozymandias' interpretation also fails in two respects: (1) By reducing the residents of New York to mere quantifiable units, he essentially rejects any notion of human rights; and (2) his assumption that he can correctly predict the future eventually turns out to be incorrect either. Although he succeeded in his plan, it is unclear how long will the world peace based on a lie last. "I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end," asks Adrian Dr. Manhattan at the very end of the book. "'In the end?' Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends," (Moore, "Watchmen #12" 27) replies the omniscient man with smile, amused by Adrian being unable to see beyond the limits of the narrative that he is a part of. The notion of uncertain future is further emphasised by the last panel of the book: Seymour, a clumsy and fatuous assistant at a New York newspaper, comes across Rorschach's journal in the crank file. If he reads it and decides to publish the story, Ozymandias' plan will be exposed, the lives sacrificed for nothing and the peace lost after all. The problem with correctly predicting future is that there are too many variables to take into account, many of which are people with free will whose future course of action can never be accurately predicted.[13] And even if it were, it would be only for some short time ahead. After then, the future would be a shadowy secret once again. Ozymandias' utilitarianism thus fails in Rule #3 in that his reach exceeded his grasp.

These two bipolar characters may reason on the grounds of entirely antithetic philosophies but they are similar in that they are readily willing to make decisions that fatally affect lives of other

[13] This theme is also addressed in the chapter 6.3.

people. Superheroes in *Watchmen* serve as images of authority and power: the novel warns against the idea of anyone setting himself up as the guardian of society and its moral authority, should it be an overly enthusiastic politician or a superhero. It is worth noticing that Dan Dreiberg, the Nite Owl, arguably the most normal person among the main protagonists finds the idea of making grand decisions on behalf of other people repugnant. "How.. how can humans make decisions like this?" he asks at the end of the story when considering whether they should keep quiet about the true nature of events surrounding the explosion in New York. "We're damned if we stay quiet, Earth's damned if we don't." (Moore, "Watchmen #12" 20) Similarly, the commissioner James Gordon, another paragon of an old-fashioned honest working man, makes a similar remark in *The Dark Knight Returns* when he first expresses his admiration for president Roosevelt's ability to raise the spirit of the country and mobilise the army after the attack on Pearl Harbour, only to feel horrible when he comes across an article saying that Roosevelt knew about the attack and let it happen (principally the same trade-off that Ozymandias makes in *Watchmen*): "Pearl was what got us off our duffs in time to stop the axis. But a lot of innocent men died. But we won the war. It bounced back and forth in my head until I realized I couldn't judge it. It was too big." (Miller 96)

The tagline of *Watchmen*, found sprayed on buildings several times throughout the book, makes a corresponding point that the idea of any authority not kept in check is inherently dangerous. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* asks the Roman poet Juvenal, pointing out the problem with enforcing marital fidelity with women. Moore and Gibbons move the quote to political context and ask the timeless question *Who watches the watchmen?*